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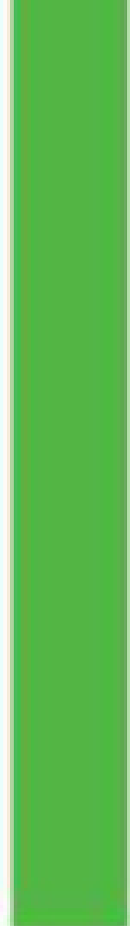
ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES
AND THE RESURRECTION OF SCI-FI'S DEADLIEST HORROR

Gearbox's FPS is the archetypal passion project, arriving in late 2012 after nearly six years in the making. On p42, we look at how the studio's doing justice to its landmark cinematic inspirations

INSIDE QUANTIC DREAM'S NEXT-GEN PS3 TECH

HYPE
ASSASSIN'S CREED III
STEEL BATTALION: HEAVY ARMOR
LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW
FABLE: THE JOURNEY
DEADLIGHT
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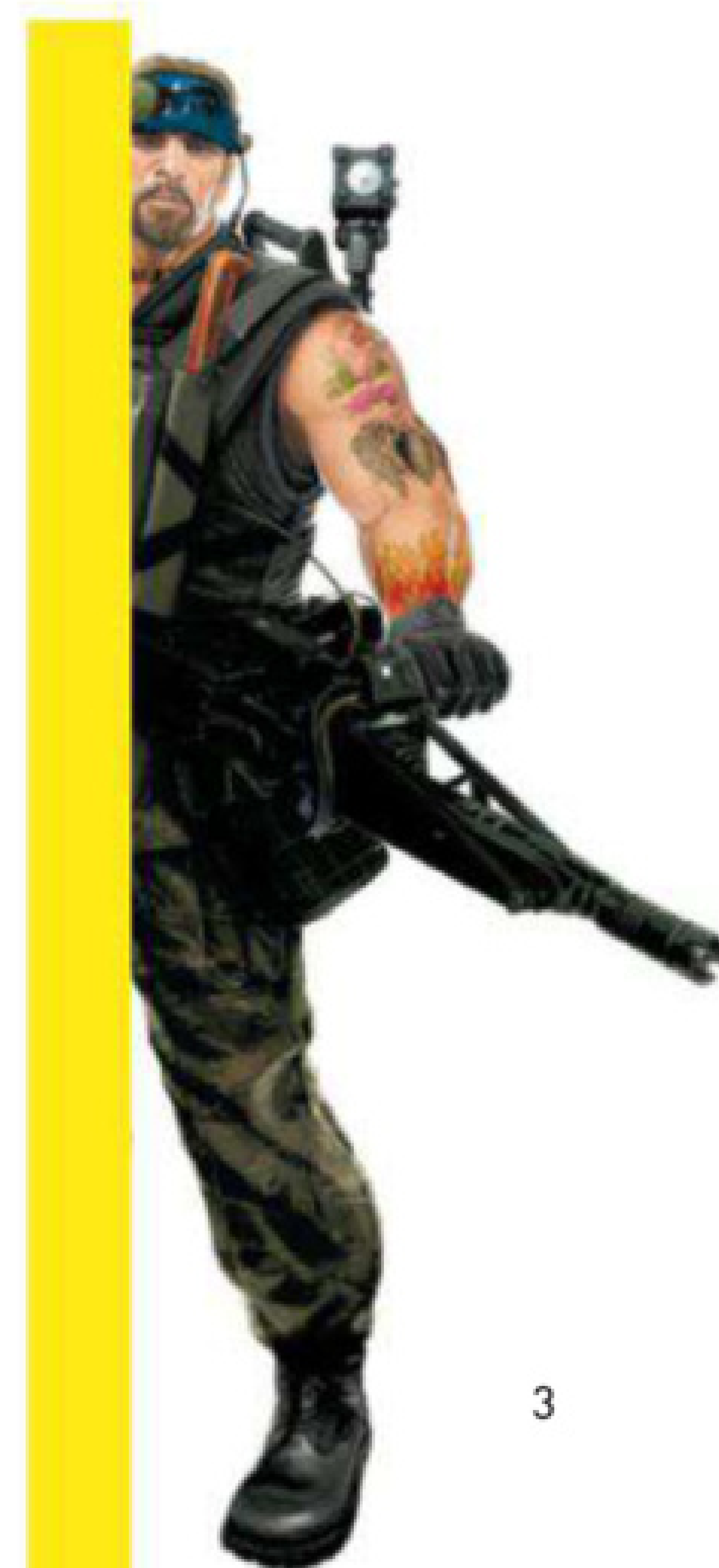


An acid trip whose power endures 26 years later



According to the aggregated wisdom of the world's movie reviewers (thank you, Metacritic), James Cameron's 1986 production, Aliens, is the best movie in the long-running Alien franchise, which continues to be expanded upon today through original director Ridley Scott's upcoming Prometheus. That even a brace of mediocre series entries and some Predator-featuring spin-offs can't dilute the affection with which the early films are held is testament to the power of the imagery and characterisation in the Giger-designed creatures and the crews standing off against them. In space, only the original Star Wars trilogy holds a more precious place in fans' hearts, and it's no coincidence that it too has been explored in videogame form so often since the early '80s. But the Alien series, and Aliens in particular, is in many ways much better suited to such treatment, which is why Gearbox's interpretation has been followed by fans so keenly since its announcement way back in 2006.

Given the experience today's dev teams have with the hardware at their disposal, there's no reason for a new Alien-inspired game to look anything but supremely authentic, using cutting-edge lighting techniques to recreate those foreboding tones, and complex AI to deliver the last word in extraterrestrial killing machines. In terms of taking us where we've always wanted to be – alongside those sneering, sometimes snivelling marines, picking through ruined enemy carcass and scanning environments for that telltale acid burn – which game is better placed than *Aliens: Colonial Marines*? Its movie-studio-endorsed setting and premise, following on from the events of Aliens, feeds its potential no end, since Cameron's film has done so much to inspire elements of so many memorable interactive experiences, not least Bungie's epic *Halo* series. Fortunately, as we discover during our visit to Gearbox, no one is more aware of the potential of the IP than the people responsible for this outing, with their distinctive no-HUD approach to presentation and dedication to co-op support that aims to capture the thick flavour of the quintessential bug hunt. Our report from the studio begins on p42.



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VLEDGE

Nivida's GeForce GTX 680 (1), its new flagship GPU, is here, and on p10 we find out why the company believes it's an exciting sign of things to come. While its host of new and updated technologies certainly turn heads, an equally attention-grabbing factor is the support it's garnering for the PC across the industry – particularly from Epic. *World Of Tanks* (2) maker Wargaming.net knows a thing or two about the PC market, too, having attracted millions to its free-to-play game, and on p14 we find out how it achieved such numbers. Success has found the pair of creative minds behind Indie Game: The Movie (3), too, and on p16 they detail the challenges of telling dramatic development stories. Speaking of emotional material, we meet with Jenova Chen (4) on p18 to ask how thatgamecompany sculpted *Journey*'s delicate voyage. And the games as art debate also gets a shot in the arm from the Smithsonian's recently unveiled exhibition on the theme (5), which we profile on p20. Which brings us to p22's Soundbytes, where we enjoy the aftermath of Double Fine's Kickstarter success with Nicholas Lovell, contrast modern perspectives on the quality of Japanese game production, and find ourselves stirred once more by Peter Molyneux (6). Finally, on p24, we give space to one more prolific speaker, Clerks writer/director Kevin Smith (7), who recalls a history of 16bit bathroom breaks.



PC visuals offer next gen now

Can desktop specs shake up the next gen? Nvidia says so as it launches its GTX 680

People often talk of hardware 'cycles', which implies we end up in the same place that we started. No analogy could be less accurate for the game industry. Now, with the advent of streaming services threatening the staying power of consoles, developers worrying about the expense of producing ever-greater detail, and the PC market thriving on disruptive new business models such as free-to-play, it's harder than ever to predict the direction technology will go. One thing's for certain: the PC industry isn't betting against itself. While GDC was getting under way, Nvidia invited us to a secret location to witness the unveiling of its latest hardware, the GeForce GTX 680, a launch that shows little deceleration in its desktop ambitions.

Though the beloved beige tower PC took a bit of a kicking with the arrival of Xbox 360 and PS3, at least in the west, the desktop in 2012 looks to be a much hardier beast. And it has big names backing it. The MMOG and free-to-play stalwarts are naturally on board, but it's the change in tone among long-running console developers that's really telling, particularly the intense lobbying of Epic, a company with especially close ties to console manufacturers. Epic's Cliff Bleszinski was unusually effusive about the PC at GDC, recommending it as the target platform for indie development, while his colleague **Tim Sweeney**, the much-famed master of technology, stressed in interviews that next-gen consoles would have to deliver a pretty gigantic step up in capability if they wanted to "remain relevant for another generation". Such sentiments were then echoed by Epic's VP Mark Rein, arriving at the Nvidia briefing to endorse the power of the GTX 680.

"I actually think that consoles now have to keep step with the PC cycle," says **Drew Henry**, general manager for Nvidia's GPU business unit. "The PC is so far ahead in capability of what the consoles are capable are doing, which is why Mark Rein says he really wants to inspire the console guys into building something better [for the next generation]. And you have to pay attention to the market globally. The console market is a western market – consoles are not prolific throughout the world. If you look at the global gaming marketplace, there's no console market for most of Asia. Most of Asia uses the PC."

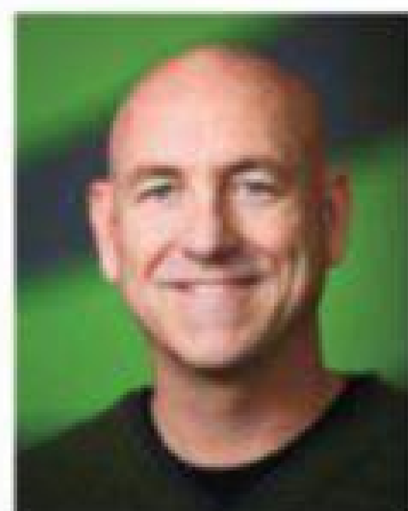
"The PC's the fastest growing marketplace in the world, and China's the fastest growing market for games"

Henry is quick to dispel the notion that the Asian market is concentrated on low-spec machines – quite the opposite is true, he maintains.

"Oh my gosh, it has been the case for quite some time," he says. "So, for instance, the 150,000 i-cafes in China, populated on average with about 100 PCs each, they all use GeForce GTX products. The PC is the fastest-growing marketplace in the world, and China is the fastest-growing market for gaming.



Nvidia's mascot, Dawn, rises once more, with subsurface scattering, depth-of-field effects and other processor-pricey techniques all in attendance. These are smoothly rendered at 1080p thanks to the GeForce GTX 680


Drew Henry, general manager for Nvidia's GPU business unit

SPLITTING HAIRS
Nvidia has also demonstrated what its new card can do with PhysX, the physics acceleration technology it snapped up back in 2008. If its abilities turn out to be applicable outside of a purely demonstrative context, then the repercussions could be significant. Hair can now be simulated in full, judging by the luxurious pelt of a yeti we're shown that's made up of 100,000 separately animating, physics-enabled strands. Equally, we'd love to see what DICE could do with the level of destruction now available, although building the game to account for it may be the real challenge.

A lot of the business models that are represented in China will be moving west. [Chinese online services giant] Tencent owns Riot Games; Riot Games runs *League Of Legends*; *League Of Legends* has become the fastest-growing online game in the market."

In fact, as the example of *League Of Legends* suggests, the PC market has already evolved and left consoles lagging behind. Free-to-play has taken off hugely, and consoles have yet to work out a way of exploiting the business model. It's hard to see how they'll avoid it in the coming generation, but given the massive profit yields available on PC, will developers see the attraction in carving off a slice of their profits to a platform holder? And then there's the small matter of streaming, which – with its potential to be continuously upgraded at the server side – might well curtail the life expectancy of the console's static spec. And Nvidia gets a slice of that pie, too.

"Two of the largest streaming services in the world, Gaikai and OnLive, both use GeForce for their GPUs," Henry explains.

But there is one thing that keeps the graphics arms race anchored, and that's the needs of developers. Not everyone is champing at the bit for a new generation of tech, and many developers rather like the guarantee that consoles provide: a large installed base with a stable spec that lasts for the better part of a decade.

"In the absence of competition, sure!" Henry retorts. "But every new capability of a GPU provides the developer with an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their competitors."

When it comes to the GeForce GTX 680, there's more than a little differentiation going around. Most hardware launches are accompanied by a degree of promotional bluster, but you get the sense that this latest tech release represents a personal triumph for the GM of Nvidia's GPU division. Henry delicately manipulates the new card in one hand, describing the way its power-supply connectors are stacked to enable better airflow as "wonderful, just wonderful". His affection for the card's engineering is apparent.

It's perhaps easier to be excited about what the card can *do*, however. You may recall last year's Samaritan demo, a showcase of Unreal Engine 3 tech that Epic Games created to indicate the direction of next-generation graphics. In it, a shapeshifting lunk in a trench coat smoulders in the rain atop a cyberpunk cityscape, before punching the post-processing effects out of a number of sumptuously textured fascist oppressors. In doing so, the grizzled hero (whose grizzly qualities, incidentally, come courtesy of the highly realistic hair afforded by super-sampled antialiasing on the edges of masked and alpha-tested materials) splashes his way through realtime reflections of multiple dynamic lights, reduced to glittering shapes by the low depth of field, and delivers hammer blows to faces that, as they crumple in slow motion, demonstrate the fleshy translucence allowed by subsurface scattering. None of these effects come cheap: Epic was only able to run such a demo in realtime by strapping three of the then-state-of-the-art Geforce GTX 580s together and filling them with juice from a gargantuan 1,200W power supply. A year later, and this Samaritan demo runs olive-oil smooth on a single GTX 680. But that's not even the killing blow; Nvidia has somehow made the card more power efficient than its previous unit by a factor of 3.75. Oh, and it's quieter and cooler, too.

A year later, Epic's Samaritan demo runs olive-oil smooth on a PC setup featuring a single GTX 680

Simultaneously, Nvidia is launching several technologies that may prove to be even more significant than the step-change in raw grunt that the card itself provides. The first of these Nvidia is calling GPU Boost. It allows the graphics card to optimise its performance on the fly for games with very different power demands. Traditionally the problem is this: you set your GPU to get the best out of high-power applications, such as *Crysis 2* and 3D Mark 11, and games with low power demands, such as *StarCraft II*, can leave your card twiddling its thumbs. You really want to run the low-power programs as fast as possible, but crank up the clockspeed on your GPU and you risk pushing the power envelope so far that your high-power programs might not work at all. GPU Boost takes the power headroom of the more modest apps and converts it into performance by dynamically raising the clockspeed and the voltage in realtime based on hardware monitoring, adapting itself to the system's demands every 100 milliseconds. What this means is that games such as *StarCraft II* see huge performance gains, without crashing power-hungry monstrosities like *Crysis 2*.





The performance gains for antialiasing will be welcomed by the development community. FXAA can now be enabled from the driver on any game

There's a similar juggling act behind another new Nvidia technology, Adaptive Vsync, but the problems it solves are much easier to identify with the eye. It replaces Vsync, a technology introduced to get rid of screen-tearing, which occurs when your graphics card churns out more frames per second than your monitor can display. The result is an unpleasant composite image of two or more frames, as the graphics card is already midway through drawing the next frame when your sluggish monitor decides to check in and grab the image.

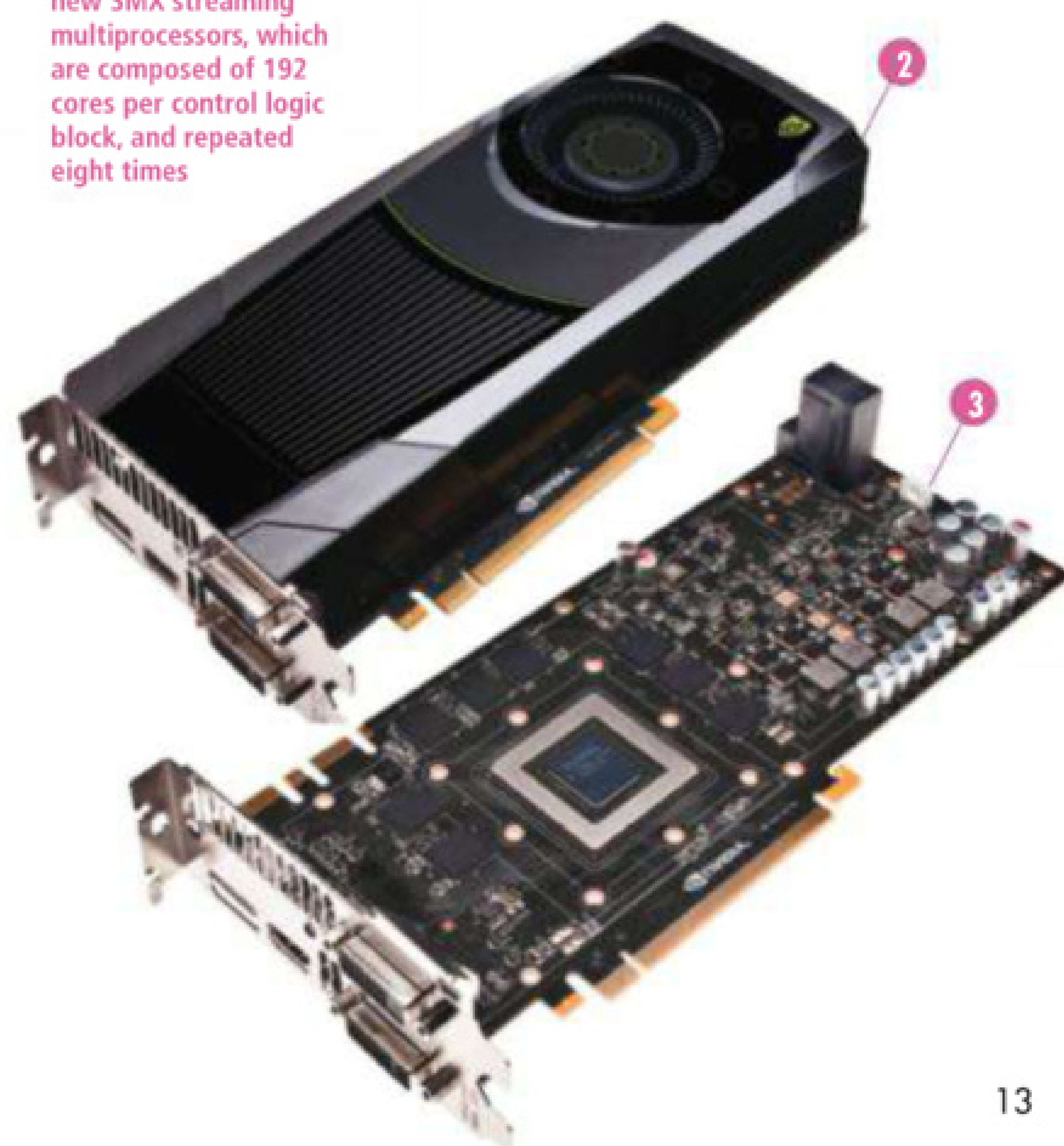


Vsync is intended to stop this by storing the GPU's surplus frames until they are required, essentially locking your card's output to the same rate as your screen. That's all well and good if your card is able to squirt out frames faster than your monitor can display them, but what happens when you hit a graphically intensive part of the game and your GPU struggles? The way Vsync holds on to frames until the monitor calls for them at regular intervals means that if your GPU's framerate drops just below the monitor's refresh rate, there's a drastic division in the overall number of frames being displayed. Monitors refreshing at 60Hz, for example, will suddenly only be able to push out 30 frames per second. Your eyes then interpret that division of the framerate as an unsightly stutter. Nvidia's solution with Adaptive Vsync is simple: when the framerate is high, Vsync is on, and when it drops, Vsync turns off. Screen-tearing and stutter are eliminated in one fell swoop.

Nvidia's final triumph is in massively reducing the cost of antialiasing – the effect whereby jagged pixel edges are subtly blurred to appear smooth. This has always been an extremely GPU-hungry process, sampling the colours surrounding an edge and then modifying the pixels along it to blend with values on either side. Nvidia's FXAA sampling method gets a significant performance boost on the GTX 680, but the big news is something the company calls TXAA, or temporal sampling, able to deliver the quality of the alternative technique, multisampled antialiasing, at roughly a quarter of the cost. The bottom line is your games will look smoother and crisper with little deficit to your framerate, but it's good news for devs, too: multisampling has proved problematic with the introduction of new engine techniques such as deferred rendering, and TXAA creates no such conflict.

It certainly promises to be an attractive spec to developers, and the fact that Nvidia has secured so many big names – big *console* names – to work with it bodes well for the PC as a whole. Rockstar is on hand to announce that *Max Payne 3* will launch on PC just two weeks after consoles, which is big news from a publisher that hasn't done anything approaching a simultaneous PC release since 2003. The attitude to another generation of consoles is harder to gauge, however, with Quantic Dream telling us that its new engine is solely for PS3, suggesting an extended lifespan for the console, and Microsoft pouring water on the prospect of an imminent hardware announcement. All the while, Epic – a company with a firmly established inside line to Microsoft – makes a big show of demanding more power from the next generation. The Unreal Engine 3-powered Samaritan demo already outstrips the capabilities of 360 by a factor of ten, Sweeney stated in a GDC lecture, and whatever console follows it will have to account for the release of Unreal Engine 4 in 2014, technology that Mark Rein has said makes Samaritan look like "a piece of crap". It's a tall order, and if the next Xbox or PlayStation consoles don't fulfil it, PCs surely will. ■

COOL RUNNINGS
1 The GTX 680 has an acoustic-dampened fan, efficient heat pipe and improves airflow around the heat sink. The result is quieter than the 580, and lowers the operating temperature. 2 The housing has been reconsidered to improve accessibility, with the PSU sockets stacked vertically to make them easier to plug in and out. 3 The doubly efficient Kepler architecture uses the new SMX streaming multiprocessors, which are composed of 192 cores per control logic block, and repeated eight times



World at war

How a Belarusian studio attracted 20 million players from across the globe to populate its World Of Tanks

Wargaming.net's bullish CEO **Victor Kislyi** describes the rise of *World Of Tanks*, his company's free-to-play MMOG, as "a critical-mass explosion chain-reaction Molotov cocktail". While his imagery is colourful, the statistics speak for themselves. This cross of *Counter-Strike* with *Battlezone* now has 20 million registered accounts. Five million of them are in Russia, where the game originally launched in late 2010 (the company is based in Belarus's capital, Minsk), with 13,000 new Russian players joining every day. There, the game achieves a peak concurrent player count (CCU) of 422,000, despite Russia's nine-time-zone expanse. "I don't believe *World Of Warcraft* in the west had half a million CCU," Kislyi says. *World Of Tanks* also launched in North America and Europe in April last year, and Europe's peak CCU is now in the region of 85,000.

World Of Tanks has ensnared a generation of military enthusiasts with the historical detail in hundreds of Russian, US, German and French tanks drawn from the period spanning the 1930s up to the end of the Korean War, with more to come. And it keeps these players with its tightly orchestrated combat, a garage to fill and a raft of modifications to apply to their favourites. The highest-level tanks – such the AMX 50B, a prized automatic-loading French behemoth – are only purchasable through levelling up. "Like Zynga, in many respects, we've created a new sector," Kislyi claims. "Those fat, beer-bellied, bald older guys – they want to have some fun without paying $50 for a box, which they'd never do."

> "The key to success is not to have too many people on day one – 5,000 is enough, then grow it every day"

Yes, *World Of Tanks*' population is almost exclusively male. In a world now dominated by games that hungrily push for the broadest appeal, Wargaming.net has capitalised by narrowing its sights. "Some say, 'Hey, you're limiting your audience by half'," Kislyi says. "Well, no, we're concentrating on the male part, but we're doing it properly."

Strategy is a genre in which Wargaming.net was already deeply engaged. Rovio famously made 51 games before rocketing to success; from 2000, Kislyi and co created eight military strategy games before *World Of Tanks*, principally the *Massive Assault* and *Order Of War* series. But they were traditional boxed titles. "That model died," Kislyi says. "It doesn't exist any more. We were smart enough to move to MMOGs and find a niche that's totally free: nobody was making an MMOG about it."

In combining the Asian model of free-to-play gaming with western-style realistic visuals and historical detailing, *World Of Tanks* shows just how powerful free-to-play can be. Not that it doesn't have appeal in the east – it's popular in China, Japan and Korea. "For us, the whole world is our market," Kislyi explains convincingly.

So what's the percentage of *World Of Tanks* players who buy items? "I think the highest in the industry. Something between 25 and 30 per cent," says Kislyi. A premium account earns 50 per cent more experience and credits from each battle, while expendables, such as ammo with better penetration rates, slightly boost your chances. But "there are no kill-them-all items – this is a game of skill. You have to manoeuvre, understand what's happening on the battlefield, coordinate with friends."


Victor Kislyi founded Wargaming.net in 1998. It released its first game, *DBA Online*, a historical tabletop miniatures-based strategy title, in 2000

THINK TANK
***World Of Tanks*' combat is deeply class-based, with each tank type taking a different role. Light tanks are scouts, scoping out enemy positions and radioing coordinates for artillery players. Medium tanks hunt light tanks, while heavy tanks deal and can take heavy damage from medium range. Tank destroyers, meanwhile, are the game's snipers. Damage is modelled from tracks to turrets, affecting speed and reloading rates, with the possibility of wounding crews, who players level up just like their tanks. Get destroyed and you're out for the round, but with an average match time of seven minutes, the game is designed so that you're rarely waiting for long. Around the battles themselves lies the Clan Wars, a simple Risk-like strategy game in which clan matches are triggered by attacking and capturing territories.**

Second and third games in the series are already in production. *World Of Warplanes*, now in alpha, is essentially *Tanks* in the air, with ground attack, heavy and fighter aircraft from 1930s biplanes to Korean War-era jets. It has a similar attitude to reality – the action is tuned to take place at close range for thrills, and at low altitudes so you use terrain for advantage. "From a philosophical standpoint, here's historical accuracy and here's fun to play," Kislyi says, emphasising the distance between his hands. "We have to entertain people in short, five-to-seven-minute blasts." His studio is also starting on *World Of Battleships*, featuring battleships and cruisers, carriers and destroyers.

Obviously, the next step is to bring all three into one. "We're thinking about what to call it, but it'll be something like Battle.net – but of course cooler." It will feature a single account and gold balance, and the chance to transfer experience points from one game to another. And through the Clan Wars system, the side who wins an air battle above a territory will gain air strikes or artillery visibility, for instance. The winner of a *Battleships* engagement may get to cut HQ communications, or gain artillery support in coastal territories.

It's a systematic plan to build, in Kislyi's words, "a battle universe of fighting machines". In fact, 'systematic' is precisely the nature of Wargaming.net's success. Although *World Of Tanks* has grown very quickly, it started slowly, with community management leading the



THE BIG GUNS
World Of Tanks now features over 300 units to collect; *Warplanes* will have similar, with both rosters stretching from the 1930s up to the Korean War. Here are: 1 Soviet T-34-85 medium tank (1940), 2 German ME 410 Hornisse heavy fighter (1943), 3 Russian IL-2 Shturmovik attack plane (1939), 4 US P-51A Mustang fighter (1942), 5 Soviet Polikarpov I-5 fighter (1930), 6 Soviet Lavochkin La-15 fighter (1949), 7 German ME 262 HG III fighter (1944), 8 US M4 Sherman medium tank (1942), 9 French Lorraine 40T medium tank, 10 Soviet Kliment Voroshilov KV-2 heavy tank (1939), 11 German Sturmpanzer I Bison (1934), 12 Soviet T-26 light tank (1931), 13 US M41 Howitzer Motor Carriage medium self-propelled gun (1943), 14 Soviet S-51 self-propelled gun (1944), 15 French AMX 40 light tank (1940), 16 Soviet SU-5 light self-propelled gun (1934), 17 German Panzerkampfwagen 35(t) light tank (1936)

way. It began by building relationships with enthusiasts to create a nucleus of 100 players, and then built out to the first 1,000. "Handpicked and nurtured," says Kislyi. "Drinking beer with them. Inviting them to the office, asking for feedback.

"Usually, big companies prefer big launches, millions of players [on] day one, just to see them all gone in a few months. The key to success is not to have too many people on day one – 5,000 is enough, and then grow it every day by just a few per cent. Advertising, outreach, word of mouth – and you have a million players in four months."

The maths works out. That's how a little-known Belarus wargame maker released its first free-to-play game, generated a 20-million-strong player base, grew to 800 staff, established three development studios – in Minsk, Kiev and Saint Petersburg – and multiple international offices (including Paris and San Francisco) in just 18 months, with no outside investors. It's an explosion that keeps on growing. ■

Indie game dev story

An award-winning documentary about indie games makes the developer's journey personal

Canadian filmmakers **James Swirsky** and **Lisanne Pajot** made a splash at the Sundance Film Festival this January with a Kickstarter-funded documentary that tracked the development of *Super Meat Boy* and *Fez*. Indie Game: The Movie won an editing award and was acquired by HBO and *The Social Network* producer Scott Rudin to be adapted to the small screen. Big names came knocking because Swirsky and Pajot artfully made the tribulations of game development feel universal. They explain their personal trials and triumphs as we catch up with them during their tour of the film around the US.

At what point did you settle on making the movie about *Super Meat Boy* and *Fez*?
Lisanne Pajot We filmed with about 20 developers as we were shooting the film. We were gathering stories. Our original vision of the film was that it would be a series of vignettes of different developers and their experiences.
James Swirsky With a through line.

What was it about both Team Meat and Polytron that made their stories so engaging to watch?
LP Each team was working towards a really big goal – *Super Meat Boy* releasing their game for the very first time on Xbox, and *Fez* showing the game for the first time in four years at the PAX East conference.

What happened to the other designers?
LP When we went into editing, we were trying to incorporate this idea of having these two narrative arcs, plus all these other characters with great stories about making their games, but it didn't all work together. It was three hours.
JS It was way too long. You wouldn't want to watch it.
LP The only story that kind of really wove in really nicely with those other two stories was the story of making *Braid* – the story of Jon Blow.

How did you manage to make a documentary about game development feel so dramatic?
JS We had this shooting strategy of getting the camera away from the computer and typing as much as we possibly could.

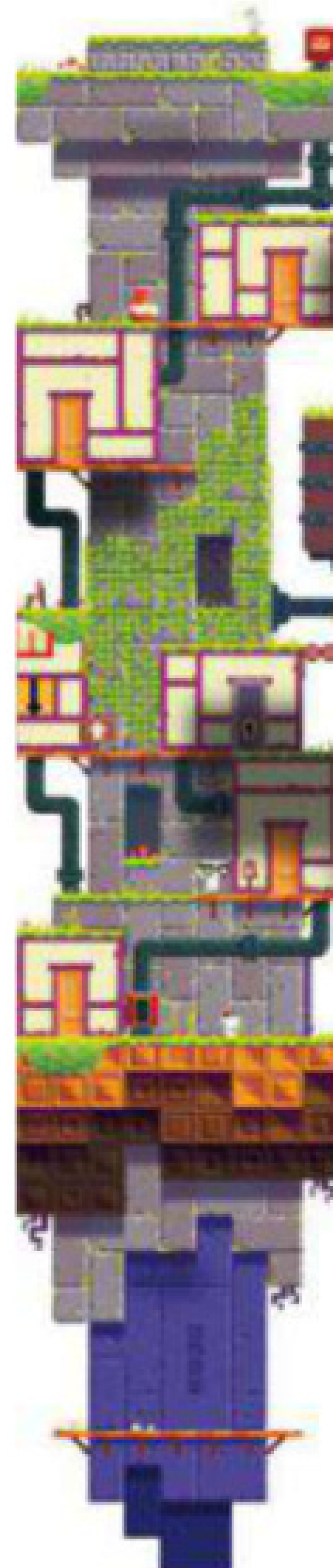
"These are extreme stories. A lot of indie games get made without the drama that you see in this film"

Some have said that a few of the intensely dramatic moments in the movie might paint an unkind picture of indie game makers. What do you say to that?
LP The film is real. It's about ups and downs. If you've ever made a big project in your life, things don't always go your way. So that's what we show in the film.
JS It has this wonderful thing of either being an inspiration or a cautionary tale.
LP Because it's a lot of work! Making games is a lot of work. And this was reflective of what they were going through in that time. They were both going through a lot of stress and we see that in the moment.
JS We definitely realise that this is the extreme. These are extreme stories. A lot of indie games get made without the drama that you see in this film.





Lisanne Pajot and James Swirsky, the minds behind the film

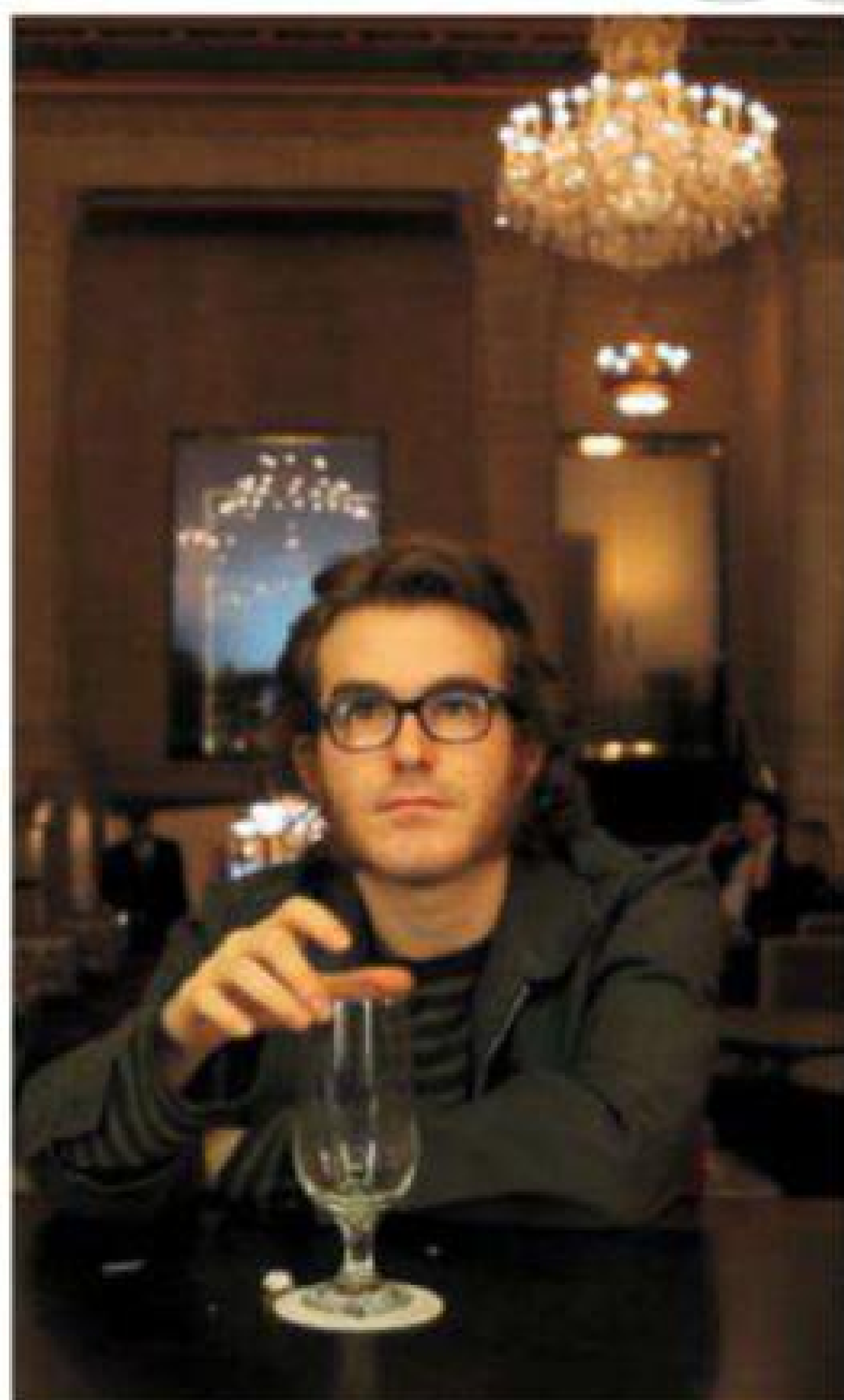


Were there moments when you thought you should turn the camera off?
JS There are moments that didn't make [it into] the film. We thought they were too personal.
LP There's uncomfortable moments in the film, for sure, and they are really personal, but we made sure that we showed everybody in the film in advance and made sure they were cool with it.

There's a stereotype that people who work with computers are very guarded.
JS Everybody was cool. It's not easy to be vulnerable on camera. And it's not easy to show the most stressful part of your life to the world. But everybody saw [the] inspirational value…

What did all this teach you about the relationships between programmers and designers?
JS The neat thing about Edmund [McMillen] and Tommy [Refenes] is that they're the same person. When you watch them interact, it's like watching people who have been friends since elementary school talk and go back and forth. And yet they've only really known each other for about five years or so. There's such a strong bond there. It's like two guys hanging out and they happen to be making a game as the by-product of their hanging out.

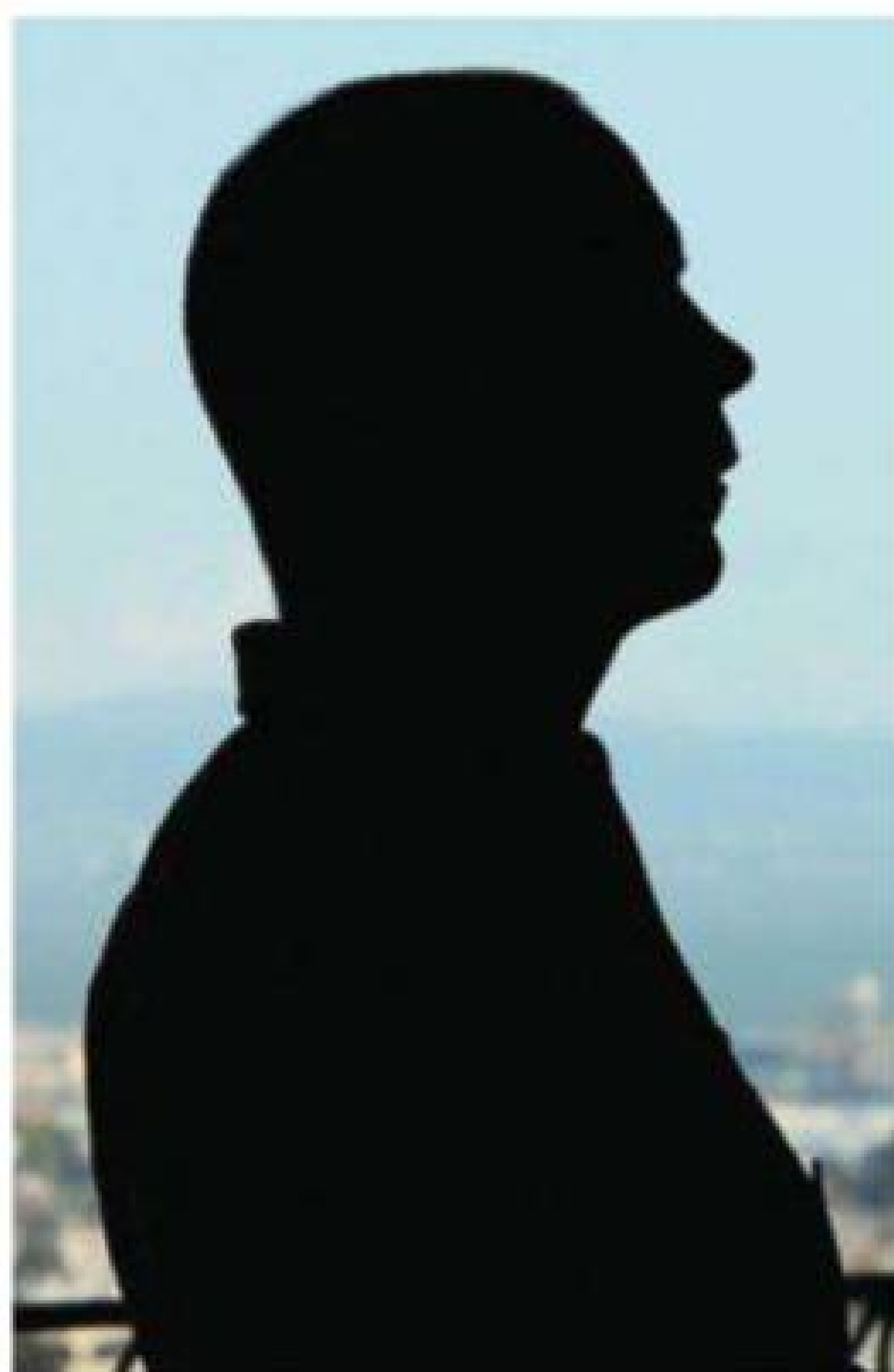
After making this film, are you tempted to make a videogame?
JS No. Remember how we said earlier that it could be an inspiration or a cautionary tale? It definitely was inspiration for our own skill sets and our own things that we do. But it was a total cautionary tale. If you're thinking about getting into games, think again.

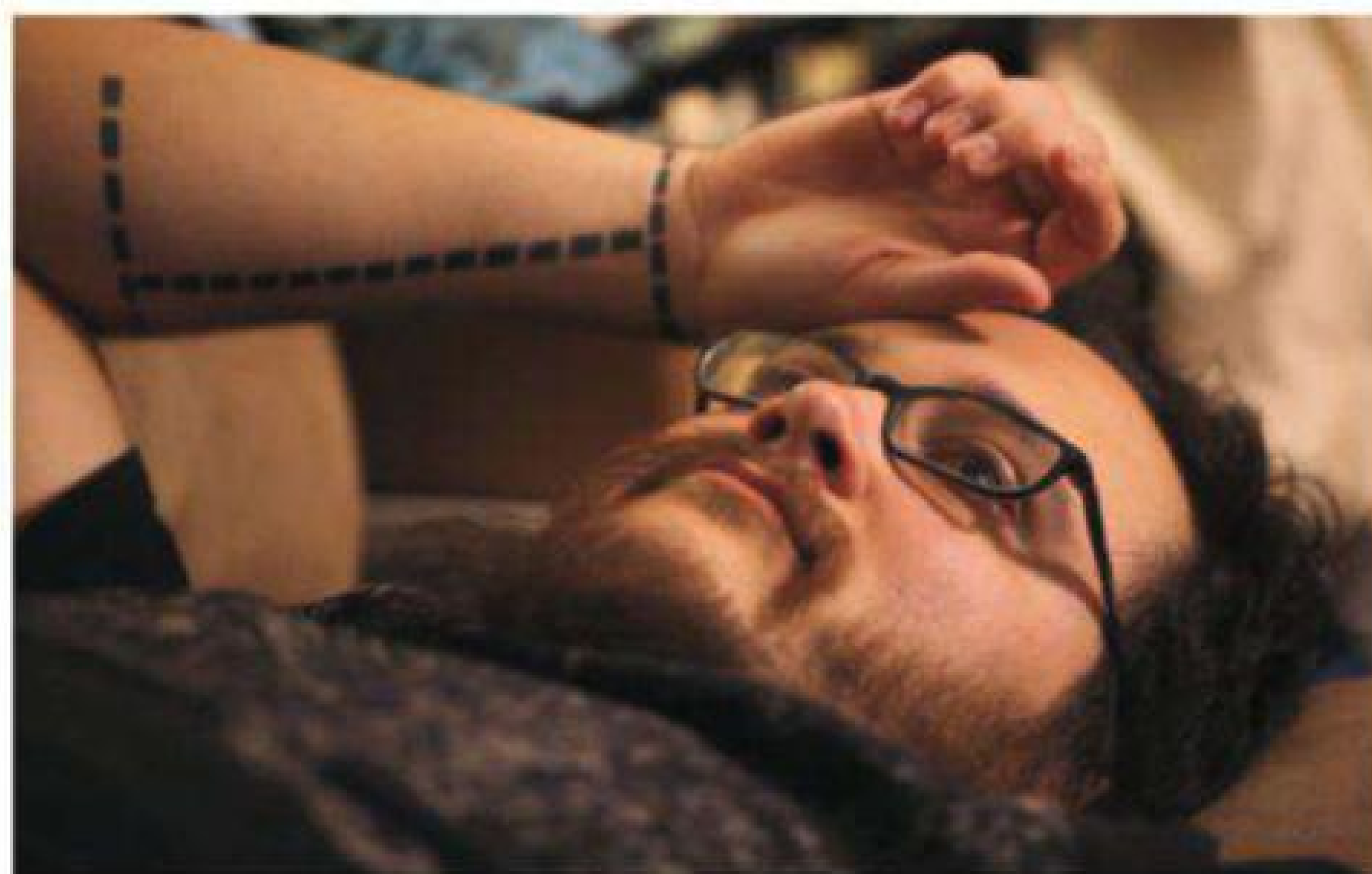


Fez designer Phil Fish experienced ups and downs between the game's 2007 announcement and its release, captured on film by Pajot and Swirsky



A challenge was to find a way to tell the stories visually. The plan was to shoot away from the PC whenever possible





INDIE IDEALS

The spirit of the developers is shared by the filmmakers



Indie Game: The Movie is a scrappy independent production, too. It was funded via two Kickstarter campaigns and shot, edited and produced by the team of James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot. And, despite great success at the Sundance film festival, they've been touring the film around the US rather than wait for a theatrical release. They're also pushing for the digital release of the movie to debut much sooner than usual because of their Kickstarter backers. "Even though we got this done in 18 months, which is a really fast turnaround for a documentary, a lot of people are feeling that they've been waiting for it forever," says Swirsky.



Originally envisioned as a series of vignettes exploring the work of dozens of designers, the scope of the film eventually narrowed to focus on Team Meat, Polytron and Jon Blow



The road less travelled

Thatgamecompany's Jenova Chen walks us through the making of Journey, and the philosophy behind its mechanics

Journey's poetic, meditative odyssey is a controlled and emotive experience, one that cleverly shaves off any common multiplayer mechanics and interactions that could jeopardise the singularity of its experience. We catch up with thatgamecompany's creative director, **Jenova Chen**, to talk about the route to release, emotional puzzle solving, and collaborative play.

Journey went through an iterative process. What did the early prototypes look like?
The early prototypes look like Flash games: 2D, side-profile or top-down, while all the characters are just dots, and moving round solving puzzles like the final game. But there used to be four players and the game was a lot more gamey. You'd be picking up keys to unlock doors, fighting monsters, and all these traditional game mechanics. But as soon as we moved over to the PlayStation 3, we realised that a lot of things that worked in the top-down game no longer worked in 3D, so the game had to change quite a lot.

And that was true of *Flower* as well – that you stripped back a lot of the more explicit game mechanics?
Right. Our goal is to achieve a particular emotional experience. The feeling is the most important thing, but we don't necessarily know what gameplay mechanics will enhance that. So in *Journey*, we really wanted the players to have a strong emotional bond… But then we had all these multiplayer co-op mechanics that weren't quite working. In a typical MMOG, if one guy has to collect four flowers and another guy has to kill four boars, even if they are in the same area, they will rarely talk to each other. And so initially we tried to make the players depend on each other [with] asymmetrical co-op, where different people have different roles and you have to use each other and work together.

But then we realised one thing: a true collaboration only happens when both sides are voluntary and a lot of co-op games *force* people to be in a collaborative situation. If you're not voluntarily doing that, you tend to fight the system. And that's when we decided that forcing co-op was the wrong way to go – we wanted to give players the choice between doing it together or doing it themselves… Once we decided that, there were so many more challenges for game design. For example, originally you'd need two players to beat the level. Now one player can go to the next level and just leave the other behind. If you connect with someone, and they go on to a different level, should you stay connected? If you disconnect, are you going to reconnect with someone in your level? That's the whole innovation [of] the multiplayer lobby system, and that turned out to be the most challenging part of the design.

> "There used to be four players, and it was more gamey. You'd be picking up keys, fighting monsters"

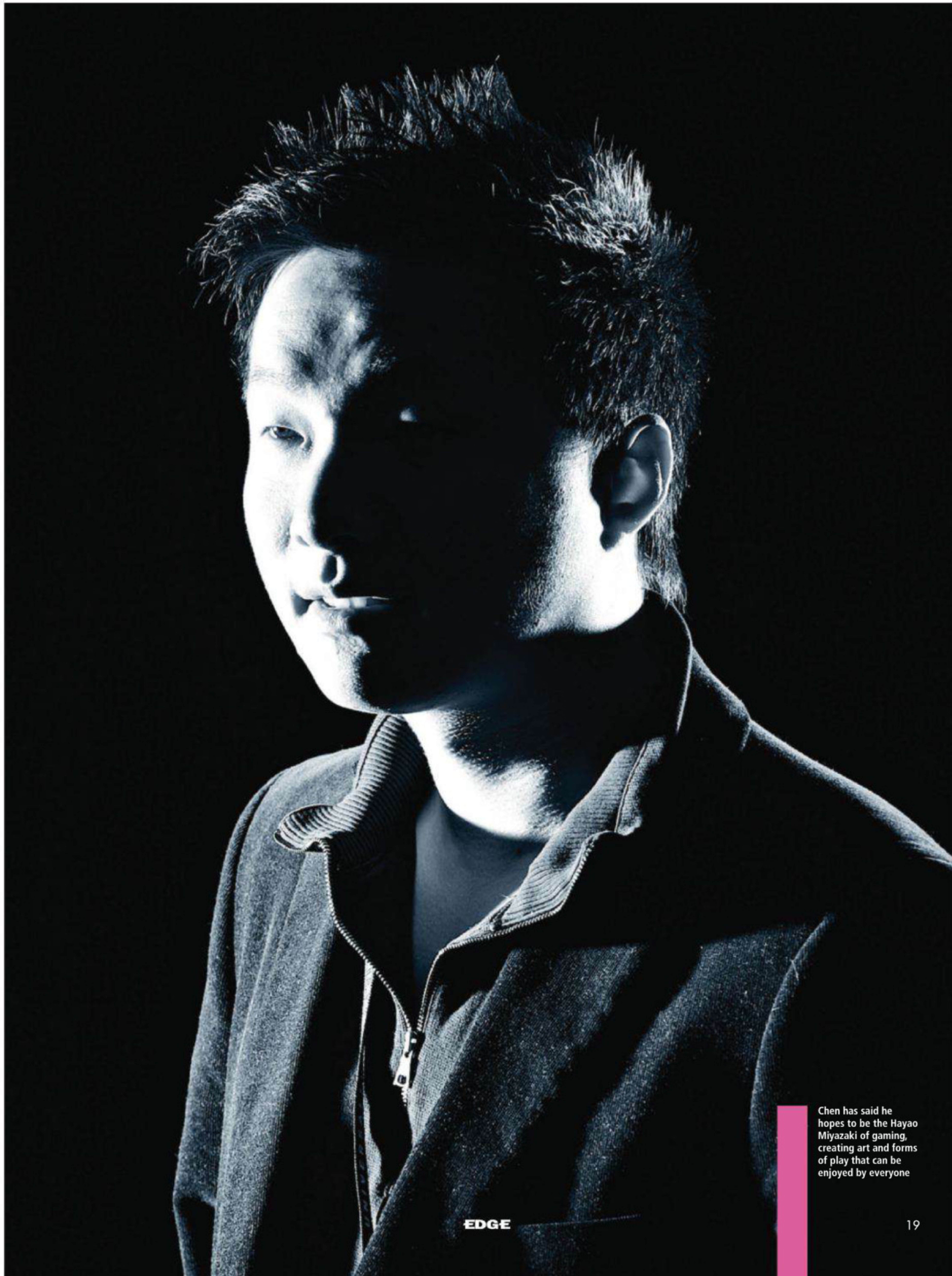
Did those early elements of challenge also undermine the emotional beats?
Yeah, if it's very challenging, you're set into a mood of problem solving, rather than paying attention to each other. *Journey*'s not about solving puzzles – it's about sharing the same emotional moment together. The wind is blowing, it's very hard to move forward, and you see this other guy being blown by the wind. You share that struggle, then you share the joy and the beauty together. *Journey*'s not really about overcoming difficulty, it's more about going on an emotional rollercoaster with someone. And because you've gone through so much with them, it feels like friendship. And to prove that this has happened, I want to show you the forum – the Journey Apology Thread. When you think of online play, you think of people being jerks, but look at what they are saying here: they're thanking the other player and apologising for leaving early. Most other games you're not putting emotions into the other player, you're shooting bullets at them.

How important is it to enforce the integrity of your fiction? Some players take delight in breaking it, after all – an example being the ability to exploit *Skyrim*'s AI by placing buckets over people's heads and stealing from them.
Because the system isn't compelling enough for them to behave within its rules. For example, if *Journey*'s characters could chat, they'd be talking shit online all the time. But we create a compelling system so that they don't want to break it. The character doesn't have arms or a mouth – the fact that we remove all those things means the players use the shouts to communicate and play under the world's rules. We want them to accept that, without noticing that they've accepted it. If someone wants to break the rules, it means the world is not well designed. I played *Skyrim*, but I never used the buckets, because I enjoyed what it was offering me. After I finished the main quest, then I started gaming the system. ■

DREAM BIG
***Journey* seeks to give us a rich emotional experience through implicit narrative and interaction. So what does Chen think of the more explicit, cinematic efforts championed by the likes of Quantic Dream? "[Co-founder] David Cage is probably one my major allies in the game industry," he says, "because we both care about emotional experience, and broadening the emotional coverage of games, because so many games are about action, horror or thrillers. There's no romance or drama. There's nothing about the meaning of life. So, definitely I'm a big supporter of David Cage, although he's doing it with a much bigger budget…"**



www.bit.ly/GRxYL0
The unabridged version of this interview



Chen has said he hopes to be the Hayao Miyazaki of gaming, creating art and forms of play that can be enjoyed by everyone

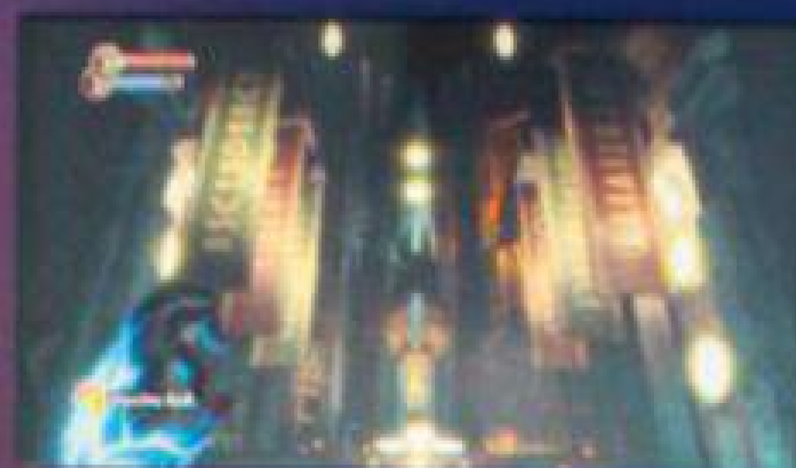












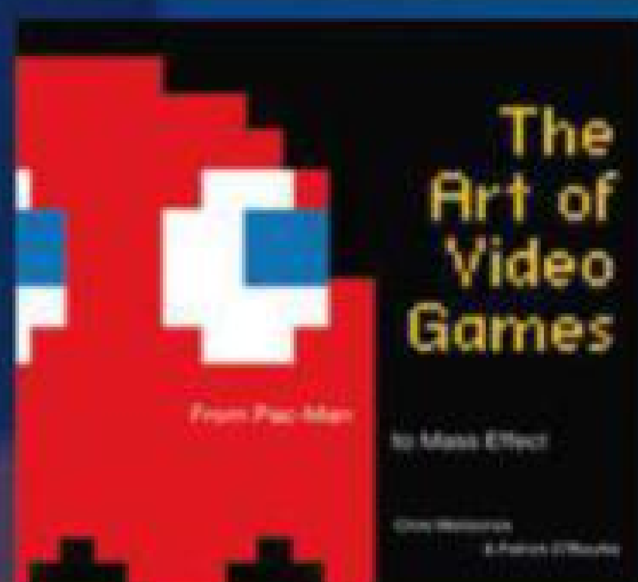
EXHIBIT TRIPLE-A

The Smithsonian museum showcases the art of games in its new display

On March 16, an exhibit entitled The Art Of Video Games opened at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, featuring 80 iconic titles. Exhibit curator **Chris Melissinos**, founder of PastPixels and former chief gaming officer for Sun Microsystems, created a ballot of 240 titles and then the public cast votes in a variety of categories to determine which games would make the final cut.

"How did we get from *Pitfall!* to *Uncharted 2*?" asks Melissinos. "You see Pitfall Harry swinging from a vine, you see Nathan Drake swinging from a vine. Technology gives us an increasingly sophisticated canvas to paint with year by year. This exhibition looks at the art of the videogame itself, not just the art that's in them, and seeks to build a narrative that shows the progression of the form."

The response has been phenomenal. On the opening weekend, the queue stretched longer than two city blocks, with people waiting an hour and a half to get inside. After the exhibit ends in late September, it will travel to ten other venues around the US.



"We've created an exhibition that's leaning forward instead of sitting back," says Chris Melissinos, whose companion book for the exhibit, The Art of Video Games: From Pac-Man to Mass Effect, is on sale from April 20

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"At my GDC financing panel, I asked if anyone had raised [over] $10k from Kickstarter. **One man put his his hand up. Tim Schafer's lawyer."**

Gamesbrief founder **Nicholas Lovell** witnesses the true benefit of crowd funding



"Every single controller-based game I pick up now demands that I strap my left hand around the controller, my thumb to the thumbstick… Every experience on Xbox is the same."

Peter Molyneux talks up Kinect – just before it's revealed he's due to leave Microsoft



"We just stick to our memories and we **re-release HD versions of games.** That is the upper limit of what we are showing to our users today and that is not what our users want."

Ex-Capcom man **Keiji Inafune** offers some cutting analysis of the Japanese game industry

"Your games just suck."



Fez developer **Phil Fish** is more succinct in his 'constructive' criticism of the east after a screening of Indie Game: The Movie at GDC

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game RaceRoom
Manufacturer RaceRoom Entertainment

While the arcade scene still hosts a massive number of traditional, extravagant racing game cabinets, boasting gearsticks the size of golf clubs and more neon than a boy racer, *RaceRoom* delivers something completely different. A for-hire racing game installation that takes the art of driving very seriously, *RaceRoom* steers a delicate line between arcade, 'gather round' experience and high-end simulation.

Developer RaceRoom Entertainment has its roots in Swedish game studio SimBin, and the software itself carries all the hallmarks of that team's long line of realistic titles. The game is only part of the *RaceRoom* package, of course, with the installation providing a fairly handsome spot in which to battle it out in networked matches. It's been a Germany-based phenomenon thus far, but UK rollout plans should see *RaceRoom* gain a stronger presence in the field, across everything from private functions to restaurants and retail outlets (there's a mobile version for rapid, temporary deployment).

RaceRoom may have its origins in the hardcore PC racing sector, but the developer has clearly kept a keen eye on current arcade trends: it's opted for swipe cards to save data such as tournament rankings, a key component in establishing *RaceRoom* as a social, competitive pursuit.



My favourite game Kevin Smith

The provocateur filmmaker reminisces about locking himself in the bathroom with his trusty Sega Genesis

Filmmaker, comic book writer and prolific podcaster **Kevin Smith** oozes nerd appeal. Above all else, he's a talker, so for a change of pace Smith took to his keyboard and wrote Tough Sh*t: Life Advice From A Fat, Lazy Slob Who Did Good, a memoir of sorts that hit US stores in March. He's also got a new reality series on AMC called Comic Book Men. Here, Smith reflects on how he spent the cash he earned from Clerks: by buying a condo and spending too much time on the throne with a moose/squirrel combo.

CAN'T STAY SILENT
For a guy whose most famous onscreen role is a character named Silent Bob, Kevin Smith is a prolific talker and a master raconteur. Whether it's going on Q&A tours, writing stories for comics, authoring books or tweeting incessantly, the man behind flicks such as Chasing Amy, Clerks, Dogma and Zack And Miri Make A Porno knows how to spin an affecting yarn and vows, proudly, to never shut up.

Has playing games ever challenged your filmmaking productivity?
Between Mallrats and Chasing Amy, Scott Mosier, my producer on those flicks, was living at the condo with me in Red Bank, California. And we had a Sega Genesis and Super NES, and he got all three *Star Wars* games. Two months, dude. Every morning, I'd wake up and leave the house – or whenever someone would come around, anything – Mosier would be there playing those games. Dude grew a beard. It was almost something out of a fucking movie, like Last Crusade. He was like the knight guarding the cup, and he just put it all into defeating those three games. So I remember watching that and thinking, 'I could never go down that rabbit hole.'

But my favourite game of all time – this dates me incredibly, and most people will be like, "What?!" – was a sidescroller game: *The Adventures Of Rocky And Bullwinkle And Friends*. I was a huge Rocky And Bullwinkle fan, and the graphics on the game were amazing. The playability was incredible. It looked like a living cartoon. That was hands down my favourite. Not only did I beat it, I went back and beat it twice.



Why was it your favourite game?
I loved Rocky And Bullwinkle, and thought that they adapted it into an awesomely playable game; the graphics were great. I don't know – it just appealed to me. I'd have to dig it up and be like, "Can I still take this game?" I bet I could take it in, like, three hours. The first time, it took me weeks. I remember it took me a while. The second time, maybe it took two or three days. Something like that.

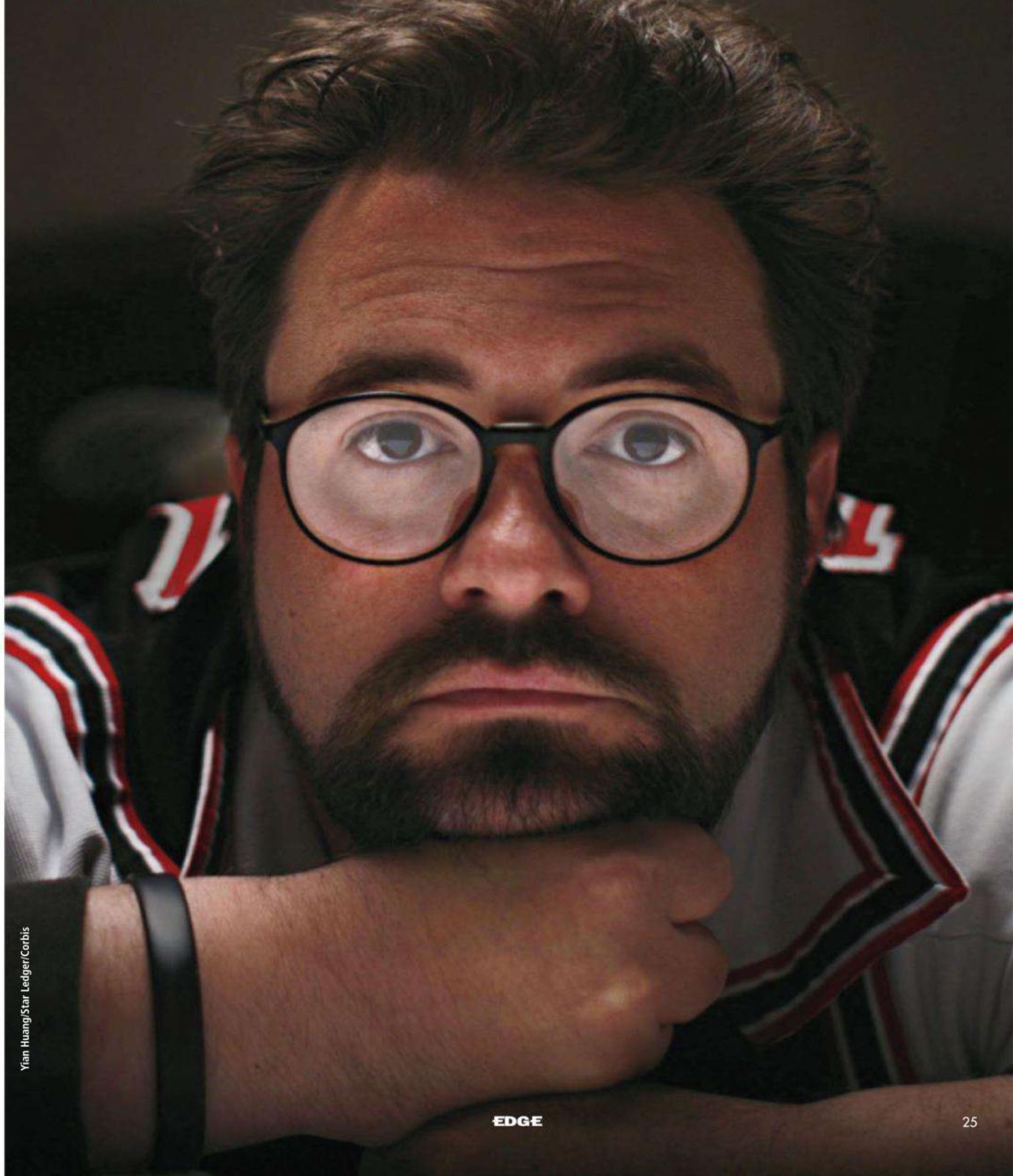
Dude, I love that game so much. This is obscene. So I had that condo in Red Bank, and it was the first place of my own that I bought with Clerks money. I had a TV in the bathroom and I would play in there. Like, everything was on a long cord, because not everything is portable like it is now. I had a little 12-inch TV and a Sega Genesis, and I had them on long-ass cords, so I could go from the bed in my bedroom, where it sat on a little TV stand, over to the bathroom.

> "Can you imagine what my kid would think if she saw me take a console with a long cord into the shitter?"

You have more privacy when you play games in the bathroom.
Totally. Nobody is gonna come bother you or try to interact with you. So I'd bring the TV in with a handle, and I had a little laundry hamper in the bathroom. I'd set it on the hamper, and then balance the Genesis on a roll of toilet paper. I'd continue playing the game. That's commitment, man. I can't do that now. Can you imagine what my kid would think if she saw me take a videogame console with a long cord into the shitter?

But in the days of the Game Boy, the first edition of it, and the DS, when it went all technical and whatnot, that's what I started bringing into the bathroom and just leaving in the bathroom. So the kid, she grew up playing games in the bathroom, but not quite like me. You know how when you're a kid, your father would be like, "We had to walk five miles to school in the snow"? My version of that is, "When I wanted to play videogames in the bathroom, I had to run a long extension cord." She just kinda picks it up and plays with the game.

Did you have a favourite level from *The Adventures Of Rocky And Bullwinkle*?
There was a mountain level that I hated and loved at the same time. Eagles would drop eggs on your head. If you did not follow that pattern, you were never getting off that fucking board. And learning that pattern was one of the most frustrating and [rewarding] moments of my life. "Oh my God! It's a ledge, jump, ledge! Then dodge the egg!" Whatever the fuck it was. I honestly felt better about that than I did for winning an award for Chasing Amy. Writing, that's easy, but beating this board on *Bullwinkle* is a challenge. Literally climbing the mountain, dude. I'm not the guy who would ever do it in real life, in the physical world. But that felt like quite a moment [laughs].

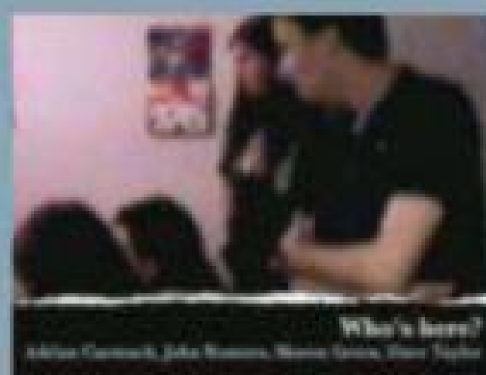


Kevin Smith never sleeps. When he's not running his own comic shop, writing movies or making podcasts, he stares into the distance and ponders the stories he'll tell in the coming year

Yian Huang/Star Ledger/Corbis

WEB SITE
The Chiptune Blog
www.chiptune.com
To the newcomer, the chiptune music scene can feel like an impenetrable, hidden fortress of audio delights. So a blog dedicated to zeroing in on the best in the (largely underground) business is essential for anyone starting out on the long road back to 8bit basslines and bitmap-smashing beats. The Chiptune Blog is steadily updated on a monthly basis, and offers up solid, succinct recommendations that might otherwise wallow, unjustly, in a music ghetto. And where else would you discover the joys of albums with names such as 7bit Date: Robot Love? Well presented, professionally written and – unlike the scene itself – easily navigable, this is a resource that's worth consulting regularly in order to level up your music IQ and tickle your auditory senses.





VIDEO
A visit to id Software
www.bit.ly/GPRkUN
When Dan Linton of Software Creations – whose bulletin board system was being used by the id team – took a trip to the developer's Dallas office in 1993, he had the good sense to take his video camera. The resulting footage is a snapshot of a pivotal chapter in gaming history. Highlights of the film include team members huddled around as John Romero shows off David Perry's 16bit platformer *Aladdin*, and Bobby Prince's enthusiastic breakdown of a *Commander Keen* MIDI tune that was built around the theme of eating breakfast.

WEB GAME
Dys4ia
www.bit.ly/GJFne5
Anna Anthropy's five-minute flash game *Dys4ia* takes her experiences with hormone replacement therapy and turns each autobiographical beat into a minigame. When the doctor refuses to prescribe oestrogen pills until she gets her blood pressure down, little pills shoot out of a moving prescription bottle, which you must catch in a disembodied mouth. To illustrate the frustration of feeling weird about her body, you're asked to slide a T-shaped piece through a gap in a brick wall, only to find it won't fit. This metaphor is bookended in the final level with a poignant recasting of *Breakout*. Transgender issues can seem daunting for many, but *Dys4ia*'s vibrant neon and wry sense of humour make the tale of Anthropy's struggle welcoming to players without blunting its emotional impact.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A cascade of curiosities that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**240

THREADS
Metal Gear Solid 25th anniversary T-shirts
Commemorating the first quarter-century of Hideo Kojima's light-footed hero, Japan's biggest clothing retailer, Uniqlo, is launching a line of *MGS*-inspired tees on April 23. For a series built on slick looks and stylish, often outlandish outfits (yes, you, Psycho Mantis), no ordinary T-shirts will do, and the designers of the 25th anniversary range have delivered some eye-catching pieces. With a price-tag of just £14.90 in store and online, they're hardly exclusive, so expect to see them out in force across summer gaming soirees.



continue

Epic musical
Warren Spector gets us excited for a singalong with *Epic Mickey 2*

Wasteland 2
Kickstarter does it again

Letter Box
Shoddy doodling is the new texting. Who doesn't need more 3D stickmen in their life?

Tax relief for the UK game industry
About time we caught up with the Canucks

quit

The new iPad
But only because we'll never get our kids to college at this rate

Developer rants
Don't hate the players…

Achievements
Microsoft ups the max from 200 per game to 400. Our free time takes another hit

3DS Beauty Clock
Who said you can't have misogyny on a Nintendo platform?

TWEETS

Apple spending their $100b on a dividend is a little disappointing, when they could have bought Zaire and renamed it Applestan.
Jason Kapalka @jasonkapalka
Co-founder and chief game designer, PopCap

Very nearly just made a pentagram with visual scripting nodes and connections. That can't be good.
Steve Gaynor @fullbright
Game designer and writer

2012 iOS game trend: space is the new zombies.
Matthew Wiggins @wiggo
Co-founder and CEO, Wonderland Software

The quality of the wordless understanding people have in *Journey* makes up for all the racist a-holes you encounter in *Call of Duty*/FPS MP.
James Mielke @jamesmielke
Producer, Q Entertainment



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DISPATCHES MAY

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers give their views on how simulated torture could be used to ask difficult questions of players, the long-lost appeal of loading times, and the future of Game, taking time to consider *Mass Effect 3*'s ending and Dreamworks' *Trespasser* along the way. Then, in Perspective, **Steven Poole** admires the lovably chubby Vita and roots out Sony's own worst enemy: itself, **Leigh Alexander** looks at hipster hysteria, while **Brian Howe** offers CliffyB a few notes on how to keep *Fortnite* dudebro free.



www.next-gen.biz/forum
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 239

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

En Masse Effect

Am I alone in finding *Mass Effect 3*'s ending entirely satisfactory? I truly feel sorry for BioWare. They've created a rich, detailed galaxy, fleshed it out with thousands of believable characters, and delivered some outstanding set-pieces and gameplay scenarios. Can 30 – perhaps even 100-plus, in total – hours of gameplay really be undone in the final five minutes of a product? A product which, thanks to DLC and BioWare's track record, is likely to have plenty more life in it yet? An online petition to get the ending changed sounds utterly ludicrous in this context. The forums seem to suggest that no two fans have the same issue with the ending anyway. For some, it's a gameplay issue; for others, a narrative one. And for most it seems that it would never have lived up to the hype. The developer, as usual, cannot win, although evoking a reaction such as this is a credit to their ability to immerse their audience. But if BioWare do see fit to implement a change, I hope they decide to end the game with a four-hour QTE, followed by Shepard dancing to Don't Go by Yazoo. That'd be the real renegade ending.
Simon Crimp

The 3DS is on its way, if only for getting the Clarke/Moyet synth-pop combo into **Edge**.

Game for it

Recently, there has been much speculation regarding the (inevitable) closure of Game. But I see it as a potentially good thing for the games industry to branch out into new pastures. I think it would be a good idea to look into other avenues of retail, and the one that seems the best fit is a bar.

I believe that if Game were to somehow transform itself into a trendy spot for gamers to meet and play each other in a friendly environment, it would be able to crack a market that has no real peers.

I'm partial to a drink or two as I'm racking up my kills on *Uncharted* 3, and I doubt that I'm alone! However, these evenings can sometimes be lonely, and I'd much prefer to sit among like-minded friends and have splitscreen multiplayer fun on *Mario Kart*. The arcade scene in no longer relevant, with outdated games, and at roughly £1 a go, it is surprising how much of a money drain this can be. If Game could open up a branch where they allow competitive (or co-op) gaming, with a bar/lounge area for people who would like to discuss their gaming memories, tips and achievements then I believe that there will be many a gamer who's found their new 'haunt'.
Matthew Smith

An interesting idea for older players, but wouldn't it dissuade families? A LAN café may be the answer. Good luck with getting a *Mario Kart* session going, though.

Joyride down memory lane

Today, while loading up *Jetpack Joyride* on my iPhone, I was left staring at the Halfbrick logo for a few minutes longer than usual. I was suddenly reminded of a lovely memory from my gaming past: the agonising wait for a game to load on my Spectrum 128K and the thrill when loading ended and play began.

That wait seems ridiculous by today's standards. Often 30 minutes or more, accompanied by screeching static, it felt futuristic and otherworldly. Halfway in, the game's title screen would appear, line by line, giving you an exciting glimpse of the experience that was to come (or not, as was often the case). And then, without any warning or great fanfare, the screeching would stop and the game would be ready.

My friends and I used to fill the time playing football, Scalextric or often just having lunch! We'd run upstairs at the end, hoping to find a menu screen for us to attack.

Looking back it seems clear to me that this wait, although a nuisance, only heightened the fun that was to come. It added to the experience. This wasn't something you could squeeze into 15 minutes, so we didn't bother loading up games we wouldn't spend hours playing.

I wonder how today's games would fare with a 30-minute wait just to see the menu screen? Would buyers be more selective when making their purchases? And would today's young gamers even bother waiting?
Ryan Barnett

Waiting? In this over-entitled, always-on, insta-response age? That's a good one.

Shifting standards

I can't help being annoyed about your scores for two games from a long time ago: *Trespasser* (1998) and *Severance: Blade of Darkness* (2001). Both received 2/10, and generally I have let these scores go, but the praise for *Demon's Souls* (2009) and *Dear Esther* (2012) has left me thinking that the old games were unfairly dismissed. Their developers were scolded even though they strove to create elements that are synonymous with recent releases.

In *Dear Esther*, I couldn't help thinking that the narrative format and total reliance on player input was shared by *Trespasser* more than a decade ago. Yes, *Trespasser* was ruined by a stupid control system and epileptic dinosaurs, but the joy of exploring Isla Sorna, creeping around derelict buildings and investigating rusted vehicles to a Richard Attenborough voiceover, is something that *Dear Esther* has only now recaptured (although hats off to *Penumbra*, too).

Suddenly, there's room for this kind of thing. The same goes for *Severance*, which had elegant battles, monstrous bosses, ragdoll physics, and a punishing learning curve

long before *Demon's Souls*. In fact, its difficulty was much better handled: the game was hard because its fights were genuinely hard, not because its save system required trying again and again. I can't progress through *Demon's Souls* because I never have a long enough stretch of playing time to spare.

Really, I'm not sure what my point is, other than slight indignation that two of my favourite games have been overlooked. But there is an underlying notion here: themes, structure, mechanics and so on are recycled in games, yet only now is there beginning to be a real market for diversity in games. The realisation that there is a greater audience for titles that aren't the norm is crucial for the industry: it denotes the level to which more experimental titles can be accepted and marketable. And that might mean developers are more willing to break the mould.

We're seeing some very interesting mechanics and themes emerging from indie developers nowadays. Yet if we're honest, only a few of the major developers are taking risks with what they put out, with some very innovative developers unwilling to try something that they think won't sell. And it's difficult to argue against them when so many are going under due to an unwillingness by an audience to accept something new. The only thing we need to do as an audience, then, is realise a good thing when we see it.
Ambrus Veres

Journey's success (or otherwise) will be a good indicator in terms of just how adventurous today's audiences are willing to be. For more on the topic, see p76.


Simon Crimp ponders a fitting conclusion to the adventures of Commander Shepard

Taking torture seriously

The trivialisation of torture in games is an issue that Steven Poole rightly addressed in his recent column (**E**238). The sense that torture is reduced to little more than a button press that yields mission-critical information demonstrates both the similarities and potential differences between games, popular culture and news reporting. In all three, torture is justified because, according to its advocates, it yields 'consequence-free' (to the viewer) information, which is vital to the delivery of certain outcomes. Yet what differentiates games is player agency. They are able to ask the unsettling question: how far would you go to realise your objectives?

In the case of *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* and *Splinter Cell*, both trade necessary torture button presses for the opening of the game space, just as the rhetoric of Bush's 'war on terror' suggested that there are limits that must be transcended for US security. Such game tactics thus serve as a powerful allegory for the means necessitated by the end of winning the war on terror, but Poole is right that they do not allow for the reflective contemplation of the ethical contexts that would normally surround such choices.

Other games perhaps offer models of what could be coded into such scenarios to present the player with a reflective space in which the dilemma between wanted ends and painful or immoral means can be explored. In *Heavy Rain*, the player is asked to cut off their finger to show their commitment to do anything to find their son. While it's unlikely they'll choose not to harm themselves and sacrifice their son, so their agency is neutered, here the game trades self-harm for a sense of urgent personal reward. In that sense, it wrestles with the ends/means dilemma that Poole suggests is currently ignored in the 'torture porn' of *Black Ops*.

> We need a game that allows for reflective/moral possibilities but which allows for contemplation

A different choice confronts the player in *BioShock*, with the question of whether to harvest or rescue the Little Sisters. But in a difficult game in which augmentation can only be achieved through the gathering of Adam, and the short-term reward for torture (harvesting) leads to getting twice as much Adam but killing the Sister, the situation confronting the player offers a choice and a consequence, which prompts reflection.

Thus what we need is a game that allows for the reflective/moral possibilities hinted at with *Bioshock* and its risk-reward structure, but which allows a space for contemplation, as with *Heavy Rain*. Such a game would exploit its potential for interactivity to ask its player a difficult question: how far would you go to win the war on terror?
Nick Robinson

ONLINE OFFLINE

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Peter Molyneux has left Microsoft and Lionhead, and joined indie startup 22 Cans. Is this a good thing for the man, and the industry?

While he always liked to get the hyperbole out and about, you can't deny his enthusiasm for the industry. Who knows, maybe it's the more independent devs that will shift the focus away from mass-produced yearly updates and back to a more organic, gaming-of-the-'90s-type affair.
Speedhaak, Edge Web site

His ambitiousness is to be admired but when it so fervently feeds the hype machine it can be a foible too.
Krs, Edge forum

This is exactly what happened with Bullfrog, which was bought up by EA in 1995. Why Molyneux then went and jumped in bed with Microsoft so quickly is anyone's guess. Perhaps this time he'll stay independent? Good luck for the future, Peter!
Daniel Rourke, Facebook

Maybe just getting away from MS with the need to have games ready for Christmas and the hardware restrictions of consoles might let his games deliver a bit more of what's initially supposed to happen. The counter could be that he spends a decade wasting money on a PC game that's never delivered.
IR, Edge forum

Fable Heroes made me want to quit my job as well.
Tom Willoughby, Facebook

On to pastures Molyneux.
Griff, Edge forum



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Vita may not be a slab of the future, but its prospects are bright. Now all Sony has to do is not screw it up

The future will always catch up with you. I remember when I bought my PSP in 2005: it was a darkly shiny piece of magical technology smuggled back decades from a super-cool sci-fi age. There had never been a screen like that, and rarely a gadget so satisfying in its dense heft, its minimalist piano-black-and-metal aesthetic. Even the crosshatched metal of the analogue stick (or as people took to calling it, a bit disgustingly, the 'nub') felt good, roughing up my thumb in sweet punishment. Playing *Wipeout Pure* on this thing was such a time-warp rush; it felt wholly improbable, as though some laws preventing cosmological anomalies had been stealthily broken.

Seven years on, the future has arrived, and it's choking me with brick dust. Or at least that's how it feels to be playing the nearer-future and tediously chaotic *Wipeout 2048* on Vita: like chugging steampunk. But even without the substandard *Wipeout*, and even with all its impressive technology, Vita somehow feels like a less futuristic device. Next to the PSP, it looks... well, 'fat' is the word that springs ungenerously to mind, even though my Wi-Fi Vita (260g) is lighter than my first-gen PSP (280g). Unlike the chic, streamlined PSP, Vita bulges with gentle embarrassment, as though there wasn't quite enough internal space for the designers to be able to cut out those lanyard holes properly.

That weight difference is also a symptom of the sad fact that Vita has a more plasticky (and less fetishistically detailed) build. An aluminium 'unibody', now the prevailing cliché of gadget build specification, would at least have brought Vita more up to date aesthetically; without one, it somehow lacks gravitas. (Note to multimedia students desperate for master's thesis topics: compare the rise of the 'unibody' in consumer electronics and the playsuit, or 'onesie', in fashion. You're welcome!)

Hardware bitching aside, though, the prospects for the variety and quality of Vita's games are arguably more exciting than they ever were for PSP. By far my favourite launch title is the idiosyncratic *Escape Plan*, with its gorgeously desaturated artwork; its childish, sadistic audience; and its beautifully silly 'Intermissions', with the pudgy enemies in their creaking black leather bodysuits (onesies again, see?) dancing badly to classical music. *Escape Plan* also – as any experimental launch game should – usefully demonstrates the limitations of the intriguing new control methods festooning Vita. In particular, it shows that players should not be asked to tap accurately on the rear touchpad first time, and also that any required 'pinch' movements – touching front and rear panels simultaneously in the same place – ought to be more forgivingly calibrated.

> To achieve the same future-slap as the PSP, Vita would have to beam 4K images onto your retinas

Unit 13 is also mightily encouraging. Breaking twin-stick gunplay down into a huge variety of bite-sized sandbox missions is not just the ideal paradigm for portable shooting, but one I wish more full-sized console games would follow. (And this is just the kind of game – whether it be surgical faceshooting in particular, or anything else requiring a real depth and range of input – that a buttonless slabphone simply can't do.) And then, of course, there's the *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection*, including *Peace Walker*, which I abandoned on PSP since face-button aiming was so depressing. When that comes out, you'll find me obsessively playing it for weeks, in the cosy world-cancelling environment of an overturned cardboard box.

It's hardly Sony's fault if the future has caught up with it: to achieve the same level of future-slap as the original PSP, Vita would have to be thought-controlled and beam 4K images directly onto your retinas. What is Sony's fault, on the other hand, is that for decades there has lurked an evil little subdepartment deep within the company whose entire raison d'être is to try to screw up every single product launch by mandating infuriatingly user-hostile 'features'. These include wildly overpriced, product-specific proprietary storage media and charging cables, and even accessories that aren't fully compatible with the things they claim to be accessories for (stereo Bluetooth headset and Xperia phones: great work, evil mini-Sony). After years of patient and cunning industrial espionage, I can now exclusively reveal why this is so. The dark, malign Sony-within-a-Sony actually began as an April fool's joke by a high-ranking executive with a devilish sense of humour, but before he could confess his brilliant comic coup, the executive suffered a tragically fatal heart attack on the golf course. Since no one else in Sony knew that this new department was supposed to be a joke, they just let it carry on and obediently executed all its insane schemes. The good news is that all the new head of Sony, Kaz Hirai, has to do in order to turn round his corporation is to track down this rogue department and burn it to the ground. (Note to Sony: please send my enormous consulting fee care of Edge Towers. Thanks!) Let's just hope that they haven't already managed to suck the life out of Vita, because I, for one, am already beginning to find its helpless chubbiness rather lovable.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Game developers seem to be increasingly concerned about 'hipsters'. But what is wrong with fresh talent?

Gamers – that is to say hardcore fans of traditional games who participate in community behaviours online, rather than those who would include games on a list of many preferred activities – have not been known to tolerate culture changes well.

It seems like only yesterday we witnessed them get up in arms over a perceived invasion of 'casual' gamers, or resisting the DLC and microtransaction age. And it was even quite recently that a clutch of them undertook a jaw-dropping campaign of harassment against one of BioWare's story-writing female employees for expressing her gaming preferences.

It happens no matter what age we're in: this group, accustomed to being marginalised as 'geeks', wants to keep its club pristine. Fans of computers, science fiction, fantasy and such have never been seen as 'the cool kids'. They had to develop their own society with its own laws in order to feel safe and empowered. Now here we are in the democratic Internet age, an info-overloaded digital world where anybody and everybody gets access to everything and anything, and the boundaries of a secret world get harder and harder to draw.

What's funny, though, is that the culture of game development is experiencing a sea change, and communities of industry veterans seem as resistant to this culture shift as a gamer might be to finding out that their mum plays the same iPhone games they do.

I can tell because we're having that stupid hipster conversation on Twitter, in bars and on blogs. Although the hipster conversation has been going on in music, in literature and in the visual art world forever, games haven't really been known to consider it till now.

What I mean by 'hipster conversation' is that inevitable and largely fruitless 'What is a hipster?' discussion – you know, the one that surfaces after people have been calling other people hipsters. For most intents and purposes, the hipster is supposedly that aloof young person who believes his or her taste to be superior to others. By advanced definition, it's a person more concerned with swathing themselves in symbols that will identify them as 'cool' than with the substance and nature of what the symbols represent.

> The unintentional side effect is that games are cool now. Isn't that what so many of you wished for?

Although the concept of a hipster is purportedly about values, you can apparently identify one by looking. Under this definition, the hipster gets closely correlated with the culture of 'cool' neighbourhoods in 'important' cities – New York's Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or San Francisco's Mission district, for example. They supposedly wear plaid, ride fixed-gear bikes, have beards and thick glasses, and colonise the service industry with 'trendy' boredom while they toil insistently at some creative dream rather than at some vast career.

Hipster is a concept that probably doesn't exist. Sure, there are tons of people out there who think they are cooler than you are, or who are ignorant about whatever it is they're being snobby about. But you can't identify them by their fashion choices, or by whether or not they have tattoos and ride bikes, or whatever. They're everywhere. It has nothing to do with youth or coolness – perceived or otherwise.

What's weird is that I heard the word loads at this year's GDC. I read it in people's tweets about parties and I heard it in discussions about young people's work. Even within the context of well-intentioned and positive discussion, I realised that veterans of the game development community feel their field is being taken over by young hipsters.

There's a documentary in Sundance about being an indie game designer. It's becoming a rebellious art form, even an attractive thing to do. The result of all of this new creative blood – people who would have just gone and been some other kind of artist a generation ago – is that games are getting more interesting. This year's Independent Games Festival saw more entrants than ever, and a higher quality bar, and it's just going to keep getting higher. We can all agree that's good for everyone, right?

Yes, more diversity in design forms, more creativity, and more experimentation is obviously healthy for our medium, particularly in a long console cycle where traditional retail avenues are bearing diminishing fruits. And the unintentional side effect is that games are cool now. Isn't that what so many of you wished for back when you were kids?

Why, then, this weird and judgmental resentment toward this industry's influx of new blood? Is it so bad if fashionable young people are bringing a shot of creative weirdness to our space? These aren't aloof cultural vampires we're talking about; quite the opposite. No one here is a hipster. When I hear people calling other people hipsters, I think those people probably feel threatened or worried about their own relevance. I think they fear not being 'with it' any more.

And if that's how the hipster finger-pointers actually feel, then rather than being judgmental, it's probably a better expenditure of their energy to look at the work of the new cultures that are coming to the design table, and the new audiences that are springing up to receive that work. Change is hard, but it's inevitable. It's even good, if you can believe that. Stay 'with it'.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media

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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

Fortnite's limitation on dudebros has the fertile minds at Epic working flat out to find a new theme

"There's no dudebros in it." – *Gears Of War* mastermind **Cliff Bleszinski** speaking to Joystiq about Epic's recently announced tower defence game, *Fortnite*.

Attention: CliffyB
FORTNITE SETTING PROPOSAL: *The University Of Cambridge symposium on gender issues under siege*

You are the head of the Gender Studies Department at Cambridge and have scheduled a symposium at a convention centre. However, due to institutionalised sexism disguised as a 'clerical oversight', you have been double-booked against a so-called '*Halo*' tournament. Some kind of theological colloquium, perhaps?

This misapprehension is dispelled when, in the middle of a roundtable discussion on wage equity in academia, the *Halo* players begin showing up in droves, identifiable by their murder-glazed expressions. If they should reach the central dais in sufficient numbers, they will rearrange the moveable letters on your signboard to say awful, baffling things such as 'SwagBitch' and 'Gay Ballz'.

To prevent this terrible humiliation from occurring, you and your colleagues must fortify positions along the exterior concourses of the convention centre, reading in strident voices from tracts by Simone de Beauvoir and Valerie Solanas, which causes the *Halo* addicts to shrivel up like little enraged pickles.

STATUS: REJECTED

NOTES: Right track, but come on, a *Halo* tourney? No dudebros means no dudebros, full stop. Back to the drawing board.

FORTNITE SETTING PROPOSAL: *The classical philologist's bedsit under siege*

You are a retired classical philologist who lives contentedly in a shabby bedsit stuffed with corpulent, mouldering books. Switching on BBC Radio 3, you snuggle down into your baggy cable-knit sweater and stroke your beard, sipping tisane from chipped china as you contemplate the lost oeuvre of Aeschylus. Suddenly, you espy a thin black line creeping toward you from the vicinity of the scorched hotplate on the far side of the room. Ants!

> Lay a maze of traps to eliminate all of the ghastly creatures before they swarm over the sugar cubes

To compensate for the narrow dimensions of the bedsit, you must lay down a long, winding maze of traps in order to eliminate all of the ghastly little creatures before they swarm over the sugar cubes on your saucer, chewing them down to fragments and residue – precisely, it strikes you, as cruel time has done to poor old Aeschylus. Frowning, you begin to stroke your beard again, while the ants march eagerly forward.

STATUS: REJECTED

NOTES: Interesting angle – reminiscent of *Plants Vs Zombies* in its almost-sensible absurdity – but the classical Greek lit on the shelves is a big problem. It's all wars and monsters and ravishings and conquests. Agamemnon was the original dudebro. Don't make me a liar.

FORTNITE SETTING PROPOSAL: *The Girl Guide cookie camp caper*

You are a young Girl Guide, away from home for the first time at Girl Guide cookie camp, or whatever it is that they do. The ongoing controversy over the use of lethal palm oil in Girl Guide cookies – which is widely thought to be a paranoid fantasy on the part of a few overly zealous health nuts – proves to be horribly well-founded when, at the end of a long day of macaroni art and mint-chocolate gorging, all your campmates turn into blue-frocked zombies.

Since your parents were among the few who had dared to suspect the unholy powers of palm oil, you have abstained from the cookies. Sensing your difference, the undead Girl Guide horde now turn your way. You must arrange your uneaten cookies into tower-like piles between the bunk beds in the dormitories and, I don't know, poison them somehow. Then you can take the dead zombies' money to buy even better cookies from the concession stand, where there's a hand-painted sign that says 'Noe Dudebros Alowed', with the 's' cutely written backwards. Happy?

STATUS: REJECTED

NOTES: Didn't mean to steer you toward actual zombies: way too dudebro. A lot of problems here, actually – a confusing storyline, hyperbolic stance on the palm oil debate, shocking ignorance of Girl Guide customs and values. Honestly, feels like you are not even trying any more. There's no such thing as zombie poison...

FORTNITE SETTING PROPOSAL: *My Sweet Horsey meets The Magic Rainbow Puppies*

Fine, we just buy the licensing rights to these two dreadful, cloying kiddie franchises and then graft them onto some watered-down tower defence mechanics. Like maybe The Magic Rainbow Puppies are trying to get back to the Kennels Of Kindness in time for The Thing At The End Where Everyone Is Happy And Dances. Meanwhile, the My Sweet Horseys build Towers Of Helpfulness that stop the Uncooperative Bats stealing the Kibble Of Punctuality. I no longer desire to live.

STATUS: PENDING REVIEW

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

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#240



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

Going places



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There are many reasons why 2009's *Assassin's Creed II* surpassed its predecessor, but among them was its choice of setting. Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus were certainly rich in Crusades atmosphere, but they lacked the same thrill of recognition the average player would feel upon being let loose in Venice, Florence or (in the direct continuation of protagonist Ezio's story, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*) Rome.

Setting a game built around the mastery of urban spaces in Renaissance Italy was the ultimate combination of function and theme. You can visit landmarks such as the Rialto Bridge or the Coliseum today, but you definitely can't clamber up the sides of them. It wasn't just the blend of virtual tourism and acrobatic freedom that made it work, however, but the fact that the recognisable buildings were able to shoulder the burden of making players believe they really were exploring the cities in question, regardless of liberties taken elsewhere. That's a luxury unavailable to *Assassin's Creed III* (p50), which, in moving to the New World, has left the well-known architectural wonders of Europe behind. New York will feature, but it will be a young, unfamiliar city without the signature skyline.

But whereas previous games in the series have been focused on urban environments, with countryside functioning as little more than connective tissue between them, *ACIII* is playing to the strengths of the rugged, untamed landscape that drew a continent's worth of settlers in the first place. Its engine has been fashioned to excel at frosty New England pines, and its lead's climbing abilities retooled to make jumping through forests as natural as running across the roof of the Basilica di San Lorenzo. It's the kind of rejig that understands how context can inform design, and is the kind of shift that 343 Industries, the studio behind *Halo 4* (p56), will be hoping that transplanting Master Chief into a brave new world will let it achieve as well.

MOST WANTED

Jet Set Radio HD 360, PS3, PC
The Smilebit-produced Dreamcast classic gets an HD lick of paint for a modern-day multiplatform release. It's still a milestone in cel-shading, still a masterpiece of world design, and still the smoothest, slickest thing on wheels.

Dishonored 360, PS3, PC
Even if this wasn't a new IP styled by *Half-Life 2* art supremo Viktor Antonov, it would still seem too good to be true. After all, it offers the promise of open-ended stealth-focused missions tied to a range of powers designed to mess with all the sand in the sandbox.

Thief 4 360, PS3, PC
After *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, Eidos Montreal's resurrection of Ion Storm's beloved series looks promising. Will it rejig the art style, breathing Baroque life into *Thief*'s ageing steampunk aesthetic? Will it keep the hub structure of *Deadly Shadows*? Whatever it decides, this is a project that couldn't be in safer hands.



H Y
P E

ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

Gearbox's official semi-sequel to Aliens emerges from the shadows

Publisher	Sega
Developer	Gearbox Software, TimeGate Studios
Format	360, PC, PS3, Wii U
Origin	US
Release	Autumn

Randy Pitchford, Gearbox's CEO, says that his team has optimised the xenomorphs' AI and animations for fluidity: "They're coming in and out of the woodwork – er, the steelwork, I guess"



ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES



BELOW **Later levels will lead player to familiar Aliens locales, such as the Hadley's Hope colony – although from the look of it, all of the hope has been terraformed away**

Aliens brings a different spin to corridor shooting. When facing these odds, you'll need all the help you can get, whether that's via online friends or AI partners





Colonial Marines' **battle will shift to the savage moon of LV-426 and inside xenomorph strongholds. On the surface, spaces are wider, and the aliens you'll face get bigger and even more terrifying**

No self-respecting long-running game studio would think of furnishing a lobby without wall-mounted glass display cases. Gearbox Software, just down the road from Dallas, Texas, has plenty to showcase, having ported versions of *Halo* and *007: Nightfire*, and created original IP such as *Brothers In Arms* and *Borderlands*. But one of the Gearbox lobby's cases is curious, because it's dedicated to an unfinished game. The case for *Aliens: Colonial Marines* contains action figures of the iconic xenomorphs, sure to traumatise any child on Christmas morning, along with the first draft of *Colonial Marines'* script and a magazine feature about the game. The latter two items date from 2008.

Yet Gearbox seems eager to replace these ageing icons of a game announced all the way back in 2006, and just upstairs from this lobby is a playable version of *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. It's here that the game's creators finally pull back the long-standing veil of secrecy surrounding the title, although the first pronouncement about this squad-based firstperson shooter isn't exactly a shock.

"Everybody dies," says **John Mulkey**, design director on *Colonial Marines*. "There's a long list of people who are sacrificed along the way in this adventure." This proclamation isn't much of a spoiler if you're a fan of the franchise, but its simple brutality speaks volumes about the authenticity Gearbox wants to deliver for series diehards.

Gearbox has landed the honour of creating official Alien canon. The deaths in question wouldn't have been the sign-off point for its licensing deal with 20th Century Fox, but considering the game picks up where 1986's Aliens left off in cinemas, it's fair to assume things have only got worse since the USS Sulaco's ill-fated last crew members made it to their escape pod.

Indeed, *Colonial Marines'* campaign opens on a skybridge between a carrier ship and the Sulaco, where you, as a marine named Winter, have been sent 17 weeks after the events of Aliens to respond to a distress signal. The ship had been reported destroyed, "and yet it's on the other side of that door in orbit over LV-426", your commanding officer states over the radio, referencing the colonised moon setting of Aliens, a place well known to series fans. The skybridge is rocked by an explosion, and after scrambling to get inside, a soldier greets you with grim news as he tends to fallen comrades: "They tore right through us."

From there, the first steps within *Colonial Marines'* battered carrier are as haunting as they are familiar. Dislodged cryo tubes might be a welcome sight, but perhaps not the



Draft dodger

The original script was crafted by TV scribes David Weddle and Bradley Thompson. So how come they're no longer credited with the story? "[Gearbox] let them forge out in their own direction and [saw] what they came back with," says lead writer **Mikey Neumann**. "In the end, there were some really interesting ideas for us to play with, but it wasn't conducive to an interactive medium." Neumann, who wrote for *Brothers in Arms*, describes a plot that should sound familiar to fans – particularly the part about the evil Weyland-Yutani corporation butting in. "This is the sequel fans have waited over 20 years for," he says.

Iteration on the lighting engine has been key for delivering the horror of the Aliens franchise. "We need to have that play of shadows, play of light," says design director John Mulkey

nearby torso ripped in half, nor the slashed wires and conspicuous holes in floors and ceilings. After blowtorching your way through a sealed door, the depths of the Sulaco appear, although they're smothered in alien goo and vines. "God, no, no," Winter whispers between heavy breaths after he sees a body left for dead in the wall grime, while another marine screams for help. This poor soldier is trapped in repulsive alien muck, begging to be cut out, and written on his shirt is a rather ominous phrase: 'Tag, you're it!'

As if on cue, an alien darts about nearby, moving too quickly to hit and appearing at every possible angle. It's at this point that players can pull out a motion tracker to keep tabs on the organic killing machine. Your marine needs at least one free hand to pull the tracker up, and since the game doesn't use an onscreen HUD to display health, map or ammo counts, the tracker's implementation creates a conundrum for players.

"With the motion tracker and that trade-off, the goal there, the fantasy, is to be one of the colonial marines, right?" says **Randy Pitchford**, president and CEO of Gearbox. "When we're playing a videogame, we like the HUD stuff, and we like getting a lot of feedback and information. But it occurred to us, if we're going to truly get that fantasy, that feeling of being a colonial marine, then we have to have, as a component of it, a trade-off of some of our priorities."

So while players will hear a loud beep when anything moves nearby, they'll have to pick between a larger gun or a better tactical understanding of the play space. Unless, that is, players team up in co-op. Every mission can be played by up to four people, and



www.bit.ly/H9Q2Eg
Screenshot gallery

players can apparently drop in and out of friends' games as they please.

After wasting the errant alien and freeing the trapped, nameless marine, Winter disobeys an order to return, instead venturing farther through the Sulaco's corridors and confronting larger waves of baddies. Though the xenomorphs don't appear in *Doom*-like numbers in this opening level, Gearbox has made the most of their flexible skeletons. They'll pop out of tiny nooks and crannies before either slithering along the ceilings or rearing back to full, terrifying height. The studio's also promised dynamic AI to deliver varied combat every time, which should help to pay off on the sense of threat of the setting and those spine-chilling silhouettes.

On the way to a recognisable recreation of the hangar from the films, the marines walk past a series of friendly sentry turrets, then pick up auto-aiming 'smart' guns that lay waste to a frightening number of foes before returning to the skybridge. There, the marine you rescued pays off on his foreboding shirt: he falls to his knees as an alien bursts out of his chest, and blows himself up. This forces Winter to retreat, crawling back on to the Sulaco. The death won't be the game's last.

From the sound of it, *Colonial Marines* will have Winter traversing plenty of familiar territory, whether pressing farther into the Sulaco, landing on the more open spaces of LV-426 or climbing into alien fortifications. The game certainly looks the part, as Gearbox has made the most of archival access, courtesy of original film designer Syd Mead, to flesh out content and present some that never appeared in the films. Gearbox also says it went to great lengths to build a new, dynamic lighting system within the Unreal Engine 3 framework. "We need to have that play of shadows, play of light," Mulkey says. "Xenos like to hide in the shadows."

We're not able to take a crack at the game's multiplayer modes, but the default option described by the producers will pit aliens against marines in team combat. Although Gearbox compares the mode to 2010's *Aliens Vs Predator*, it sounds more like *Left 4 Dead*, as the human side's firepower faces off against aliens' heightened senses, manoeuvrability and melee attacks. Gearbox says that we can expect accumulation and challenges through both the single- and multiplayer modes, and the points players earn can be spent to unlock weapons, gear, alien classes and more. In fact, points earned in each mode may be spent on the other.

Public demos of the game have hinted at gear such as the flamethrower and iconic power loader suits. Beyond that, Gearbox is remaining coy on the exact nature of *Colonial Marines*'s firepower, but has said that we can expect "the classic arsenal from the film".

The short demo assuages our basest fears about the game's delays, comparing well to Aliens in both look and acid-splattered combat. But we see only one brief level, and it's obvious that Gearbox wants to keep a lid on any major surprises that may be in store.

The studio has promised dynamic AI to deliver varied combat every time

Perhaps campaign co-op will open up more customisation options, and we hope that the xenomorphs prove as horrifying to deal with as Gearbox promises – having to tensely watch the angles to survive has the potential to deliver plenty of the series' signature thrills. And hopefully the script will embrace the cocky, character-driven writing that made the films so likeable; the sequences we've seen don't feature much beyond one-liners.

Ultimately, the game will live and die by its devotion to its decades-old source material. Positioned in the tight timeframe between Aliens and Alien 3, *Colonial Marines* is set to unveil a few surprising xenomorph types and more detailed takes on the films' set-pieces. Between videogames that have done Alien-style combat to death and modern films, such as Attack The Block, that have reimagined the terror of an alien invasion, Gearbox will need all the firepower it can muster to convince us that its space marines are, as Private First Class Hudson bragged so long ago, still the "ultimate badasses". No doubt it will come out fighting on Sega's heavyweight stand at E3 in June. ■

Q&A
John Mulkey
Design director, Gearbox



What was important in crafting co-op gameplay that feels true to the franchise?
The aliens, by nature, the way that they work [is] they hunt you. They're predators and stalkers. We have the great mechanic of the motion tracker, so in our game the core gameplay loop is that you have to be aware of where the incoming attacks are coming in, or else it's really your ass. These guys are brutal when they get to you. It's serious. You'll want to be tracking targets, trying to nail targets at distances as they're closing in on you and not let them get to you. They're gonna come at you from a lot of different directions. In a co-op situation, it's great. You can do the whole back-to-back, covering each other thing, and you can have one guy focused on keeping the tracker up, calling out targets… That's one example.

The sense of enclosed terror is often a solitary experience in the films. How do you preserve that in a co-op context?
A lot of it comes down to the mission design itself, how the layouts are put together to give what I call these 'points of possibility'… It's the position in the world where something can change, a threat can come through, that kind of stuff. Through that notion, the way the xenos work, the way they are stalkers, how they can enter the space in such interesting ways, you can feel vulnerable while you're carrying a pulse rifle, and multiple people together are going to feel vulnerable because of the way it's played out. We're also adding a lot of cinematic presentation things where we demonstrate how deadly these things are, how deadly the situation is, and how they have control over the situation. You're moving through it with far less control. There are areas where you're really vulnerable. Being with co-op and other players, you'll leverage that as you try to manage this vulnerability.

You have a lot of Aliens art and assets from Fox, plus hi-def console hardware – how do you make the most of that?
The horsepower we have for the visuals that we're presenting – we're going to revisit things from the films. You're going to go to Hadley's Hope, you're going to go to different locations that are from the films. And the visuals are turning out amazing. It's not just evocative of Hadley's; we're at a point where we're making Hadley's. You're walking around in the film set. You're fighting xenomorphs right in the film. It's such a legitimate experience; it's definitely that fantasy fulfilment [for] people who like this universe. You get to walk around in it.







ABOVE + LEFT **There's a lot of work going into the marines, but given the nature of Aliens, don't get attached.** RIGHT **Gearbox is being cagey about your arsenal, but as this concept art makes clear, smart guns are certainly in the frame**



RIGHT **Although the game plays out as an FPS, you'll get to check out Private Winter, the lead colonial marine in this expedition, when the camera pulls away for tense moments such as cutting troops out of traps**

Design showcase

The Aliens franchise may have spent a while in stasis, but Gearbox is being no slouch when it comes to recapturing a universe that has informed the nightmares of millions







ABOVE **Renowned sci-fi film concept artist Syd Mead lent a helping hand to Gearbox as it brought his decades-old creations to life. "Seeing all the reference stuff no one else gets to see has been huge and exciting," says producer Brian Burleson.** LEFT **A lot of work has gone into making the aliens scuttle about correctly, and Gearbox promises AI that will challenge players too**

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After two samey semi-sequels, *Assassin's Creed* has finally left the Renaissance behind, turning to the untapped frontier of a young America in order to shift to a focus on non-urban exploration



HYPE

ASSASSIN'S CREED III

Ubisoft heads for the wild frontier, but how much revolution is truly going on?

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house (Montreal)
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin Canada
Release October 2012

After murdering his way through a sizable chunk of Renaissance Italy, Ezio Auditore da Firenze has finally hung up his hidden wrist blades. In his place is Connor, a half-Mohawk, half-British inhabitant of Colonial America, who (in as-yet-unseen circumstances) comes to discover and embrace his assassin ancestry just as the restive colonies prepare to throw off the tyranny of the king and go to war.

The American Revolution might be a perfect setting for the *Assassin's Creed* brand of storybook history, its open warfare making for a rip-roaring change of pace from the oft-shadowy conspiracies of *Assassin's Creed II* and its follow-ups, but is Connor the perfect protagonist? Ezio's swashbuckling swagger gave the series a jolt of matinee charm, while Connor is a less scene-stealing lead at first glance. His sober pronouncements lack Ezio's charisma, and his detailed assassin's garb and European heritage muddle the faint, slightly discomfiting hints of noble savage about him. This addition to the thin ranks of gaming's Native American leads avoids being a stereotype, but we hope a personality can be forged from all these contradictions.



ASSASSIN'S CREED III



BELOW **Cinematics are improved by simultaneously capturing body movement, facial movement and voicework. Animators have doubled the number of animation points in faces, too, focusing in particular on eye and mouth details**

Why don't we see this setting more frequently? "It's incredibly difficult for shooters to explore the American Revolution," Francois says, "because guns weren't so hot back then. It took forever to reload a musket"





Connor's the only weak link in what's an otherwise thrilling demonstration of *Assassin's Creed III*'s potential. Series fans couldn't be blamed for feeling exhausted after three games' worth of Ezio, yet there's enough change on show to justify a fourth *Assassin's Creed* in as many years. But as director of IP development **Tommy Francois** explains, *Assassin's Creed*'s overhaul has emerged naturally from its change in setting.

"We had five or six people doing research on the American Revolution," he reveals. "The game spans a 30-year period from 1753. You can imagine how much work that was, specifically because the American Revolution is one of the periods in history from which we have the most documentation."

What this authenticity means for players is historically accurate missions (ancient Templar conspiracies notwithstanding), weaving in and out of known events. It means combat altered to account for the technology of the time, with slow-firing muskets giving packs of redcoats a one-chance shot to down Connor as he closes in from range. And it means two famous cities, New York and Boston, with wide streets and a lack of well-known landmarks representative of the settlements at the time. But it also means there's a wild, untapped frontier connecting those settlements, and it's here that the most significant overhaul of the *Assassin's Creed* formula will be found.

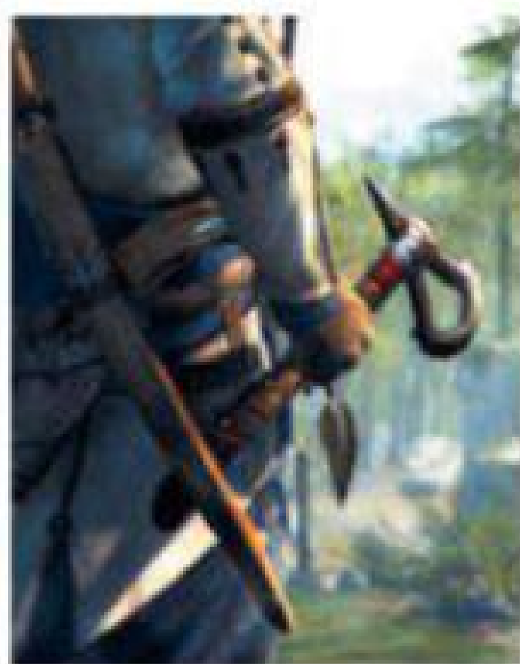
"It's a humongous area," Francois continues. "It's actually 1.5 times the size of Rome in *Brotherhood*. We needed to make sure it wasn't just something aesthetic. One of the pillars of *Assassin's* is exploration. And Connor is an American Indian. He needs to feel comfortable there."

The trees are the most obvious change, the region's tall canopy adding a new method of locomotion. Whereas rooftops offer flat or slanted planes that are easily jumped between, here we see Connor picking his next perch more deliberately than Ezio ever had to – sometimes clambering vertically to reach a higher branch, and sometimes bracing himself between Y-shaped splits in the trunk. A full, supple range of animations can handle most arrangements of foliage, however, with Connor hanging and grabbing branches one after another, climbing frame-style, when they begin to group closely together.

But forests offer more than trees, as lead animator **Jonathan Cooper** points out. "It was important to revisit the climbing system to tackle rock formations. The new system is based on real rock-climbing movements researched by the team." It certainly seems dynamic when we watch Connor clamber a rocky surface more uneven than anything the clean lines and smooth curves of Renaissance architecture ever troubled Ezio with tackling.

"It's a humongous area. It's actually 1.5 times the size of Rome in Brotherhood"

The forest setting looks to bring an element of consideration to a climbing system that has until now favoured 'fling yourself and forget' free-spirited parkour. Organic



String theory

Originally, Connor was equipped with a 'chain blade', a sort of extending knife on a chain, enabling him to impale enemies from the treetops. It's been switched for the less substantial rope dart for the sake of historical accuracy. "As much as we exaggerate history in *Assassin's*, we don't want to go too fantasy," Francois asserts. "We want to stay true to the period we've set it in. The weapon didn't look authentic." Connor was also originally going to scalp his victims, but "we found out through research that [Mohawk] Indians didn't scalp," Francois says. "Plus it didn't serve gameplay, [and] made it look more violent than it needed to."



As well as a bow, tomahawk and hidden blade, Connor carries dual pistols, and can also snatch firearms from soldiers. There's even a cover system, although the focus here won't be on firefights

arrangements of trees and cliffs provide less obvious perches for assassinations than previous games' telegraphed overhangs, and while the movement has lost none of its grace, there's clearly been some effort to communicate the sheer exertion of mastering such a space. "Connor now uses more or less effort to traverse the undulating terrain," says Cooper. "[This connects him] to the environment like never before. He applies appropriate effort depending on the depth of the snow, as he struggles to move as fast as possible." It's no exaggeration. Deep snow banks might provide the ideal route for stealthy assassinations, but Connor's walking pace notably drops as he traverses them.

As Connor trudges through the forest, he happens upon the dead body of a redcoat (found by following the blood trail splattered on the snow). Any mystery surrounding this death is short-lived, though, as an angry bear descends on Connor, swatting him to the ground with a swipe of its paw. It may just be scripted for this encounter, but for a moment Connor seems stuck in the white landscape. Then he pulls himself out and gets in an elegant stab to the neck with his hidden blade before the struggle can go on any longer.

"In the frontier zone, we consider the wildlife to be our 'crowd'," Francois explains, referring to a defining feature of *Assassin's Creed*'s residential districts. "There's going to be a lot you can do with wildlife. If you kill an animal with a musket, that would be sloppy; the skin would have more holes, things like that, [and] you'd get a smaller reward. Connor is an American Indian; he has a great respect for nature, and it's going to show in his interactions with animals."

As well as playing host to these new mechanics, the frontier zone will contain smaller settlements, and be the location for a significant chunk of the game's missions. It has the bonus of looking beautiful, recalling (in winter, at least, since different weather types and summertime will also feature) the frosty charms of *Red Dead Redemption*'s West Elizabeth section, but looking and feeling more directly interactive to boot.



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Screenshot gallery





That isn't to suggest the townships look any worse, as a trip to Boston proves. As Connor disembarks from a ship in the busy docks, there's a sense of period atmosphere that rivals anything in Venice, Florence or Rome. Union flags flutter from docked navy vessels, lovingly detailed wooden buildings line the streets, and a crowd filled with lively NPCs surges around Connor. Importantly, it also interacts with him – one dogged salesmen pursues him as he walks along the pier, eventually arriving at a customs checkpoint staffed by His Majesty's finest.

But the redcoats aren't happy with his presence, and a classic *Assassin's Creed* chase ensues. It will feel more familiar to anyone who's played previous games in the series than the forest scenes, but a couple of minor innovations appear. The first, as Connor charges through a hectic market with soldiers close behind, is a new capability to seamlessly leap onto moving objects. In this case, Connor springs on top of a rolling wagon that bridges the gap between two stalls for a precious moment. The second is the ability to head inside buildings. With suspiciously perfect timing, a Bostonian lady opens her second-floor window, only for Connor to burst into her room and out of an exit on the other side of the house. "It's a small innovation," admits Francois, "but it's important to the pacing."

While chases seem to work as before (the soldiers give up the pursuit soon after they lose sight of Connor), the environments are obviously very different to anything we've seen in an *Assassin's Creed* to date. Streets are wider, and while a few carefully placed trees bridge the gaps between buildings, it's hard not to come away with the sense that the series' relatively under-used 'social stealth' elements, such as blending into crowds, are going to have to be brought to the fore.

Ubisoft finishes our demonstration with a set-piece on a scale far beyond anything in previous games: The Battle Of Bunker Hill, an early skirmish during the siege of Boston. While Ubisoft is keen to stress that Connor has an overarching agenda of his own, for now he seems to be favouring the colonial forces, receiving an order from General Israel Putnam (issuing the famous "don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes" order when Connor arrives) to assassinate a redcoat leader who's lurking deep behind enemy lines.

The scale of the battle is vast, and oddly reminiscent of *Empire: Total War*, as musket fire from rows of British troops leads to eruptions of smoke on the distant hillside. But once the impact of the scale diminishes, Connor's route through the battle is relatively pedestrian, picking out available cover in between volleys of musket shots. Much more interesting is a revamped battle system shown when Connor runs into a squad of soldiers heading towards the frontline.

Ezio's elegance has been exchanged for brutal slaying, and Connor's tomahawk gets a full workout. What's more, one takedown, in which Connor manages to give a soldier a face full of his own musket, looks set to become a signature manoeuvre. To get up close, Connor pounces and uses a soldier as a human shield,

> ***"We now have kills where the animation doesn't slow before you strike a target"***

the long reload time of muskets meaning one shot is all he has to be concerned with. We can't tell from this encounter if enemies still patiently attack one at time, but Connor certainly seems to flow through them more smoothly than ever. "We now have kills where the animation doesn't slow before you strike a target," Francois reveals. "It sounds like nothing, but it gives our game a better pace." The impact of this tweak is made clearer when Connor finally finds his target's camp: he charges in and kills two soldiers without losing one iota of the momentum he then uses to leap upon his victim.

Assassin's Creed III is a huge undertaking. Its scale alone threatens past games in the series, but this isn't just a case of bigger is better. Interactions have been overhauled, and the new setting is informing every aspect of the game. Ubisoft can't resist dubbing it a revolution, but that's missing the point. This is still *Assassin's Creed*, but it feels fresher and more exciting than it has since a boyish Florentine named Ezio was first unveiled. ■

Q&A
Matt Turner
Lead script writer, Ubisoft Montreal



Why the American Revolution?
It wasn't just picked out of the hat. For us, the setting is always just the backdrop for the story of the Assassins and Templars, which is the core of the fantasy. What happened during the Revolution reflects perfectly where our Assassin/Templar story was going to go. On top of that, for us it was important that *ACIII* was not just a reskin. It had to be new.

With that in mind, how did you go about designing and writing Connor?
Well, it was again all about making a new *Assassin's Creed* all the way through. That meant the character too. It meant the character had to be driven by a new reason, reasons that were unique to him. Ezio's an extremely successful character, and that's a big pair of shoes to fill. We needed a character who was at home in the frontier, so the Mohawk aspect was kind of a no-brainer. We've worked really hard to set Connor apart in the way he fights, the way he moves, and the way he talks. All these things needed to be different. But after that, we started exploring who he would be. He's driven by justice, where Ezio was driven by revenge. He's more earnest and direct. We show his whole life: you grow up with him, see him as a kid, and you see why he becomes what he is.

You're dealing with the Revolutionary War, as well as a plotline involving the Native American people. Do you remain impartial, or make judgements?
For us, it's important to not take sides and just portray the history, not trying to colour it. And, you know, regarding the stuff that happened to Native Americans at that time, we want to address that as honestly as possible, and that will also contribute towards Connor's character, for sure. And it's something that we think often gets overlooked in terms of that time, [lost] in the glory of the whole thing. It's important to the brand to be quite true to the history, and we want to give that story as much attention as the stuff that most people will know about.

When dealing with historical characters, how do you fill in their personalities?
That's the thing; for the most part – especially for the most famous characters, like Washington and Franklin – the historical record for what those guys were up to is astonishingly detailed... so we're able to paint a pretty accurate picture of what they were like. For the lesser-known characters, we have to make more of a choice. And that's kinda fun, to try to surmise what a person was like.

As well as more detailed NPCs, Ubisoft wants to highlight the presence of more children and animals in towns. This looks more vibrant than before, but could easily be filled with repeating animations

Eight studios are involved in *ACIII*'s production. We hope it can avoid *Revelations* syndrome, in which the game is clearly slotted together from parts





H|Y
P|E

HALO 4

The ring cycle continues. Can 343 take it to new places?

Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	In-house (343 Industries)
Format	360
Origin	US
Release	2012

Halo 4 **is running on an overhauled engine that 343 claims is a significant advance over *Reach*'s. It looks cleaner and glossier, with smoother animation, plus there's work being done on facial animation for those without helmets**



HALO 4

Halo 4 marks the return of the beloved Battle Rifle, the weapon having been spurned in *Reach* in favour of the single-shot DMR. As with all of *Halo*'s returning hardware, it's been updated both visually and aurally



The *Halo* series has laboured under an air of finality for years now, with Bungie ending the original trilogy in 2007, and then finishing its work on the franchise with the apocalyptic *Halo: Reach* towards the end of 2010. So you have to feel for 343 Industries, the studio that has the inestimable job of kickstarting it again with *Halo 4*.

After all, the studio is in an exceedingly delicate position. On the one hand, it must make the series its own by building on Bungie's work – not least to claw back some of the popularity and regard that *Halo* has lost to the likes of *Call Of Duty*. But it also has to satisfy fan expectations for continuity, while being be careful not to talk *Halo 4* up as the kind of step forward that clumps all over the honour of its illustrious forebears.

For its part, 343 Industries says that it wants to make this latest take on the IP its own *Halo* game. As franchise development director **Frank O'Connor** explains, "It's really about evolving the game in smart and interesting and innovative ways, so that our team feels like they shipped something they love, respect and honour, and that they've made it better in every way they could. It's really not about building equity for 343, it's about building equity in the *Halo* universe in a continuing way."

"We don't want to imitate what's gone before," says creative director **Josh Holmes**. "We need to find our own voice and give ourselves the freedom to take chances and push things forward. In some ways, you can see *Halo 4* as a bit of a reboot."

Quite how 343 will achieve this won't become apparent until it provides a more in-depth showing of the game, presumably at E3 later this year, but we do know the general plan. *Halo 4* will, in Holmes' words, be "the beginning of an epic new sci-fi saga that will define the next decade for *Halo*". We also know that it will follow on from the events we witnessed at the end of *Halo 3*, with Master Chief falling towards an unknown planet while in cryogenic sleep.

"We don't want to imitate what's gone before. We need to find our own voice"

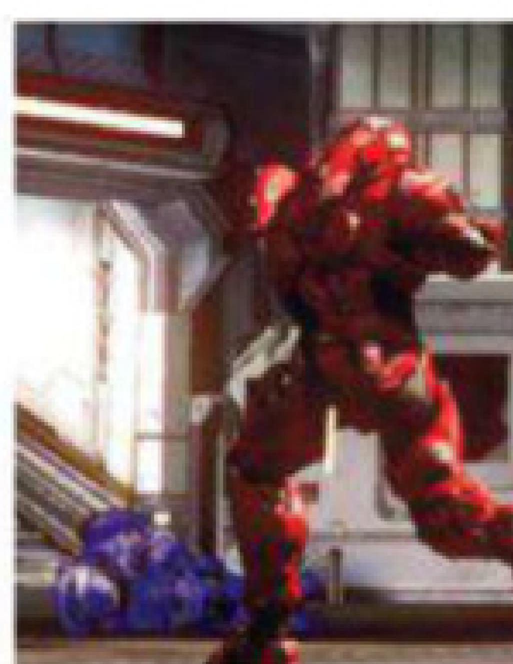
So Master Chief will remain the star of *Halo 4*, but this time around he'll be kitted out in a suit of streamlined armour that's intended to better imply his athleticism and power, with joints exposed between its heavy plates. And similar to the Spartan III's armour in *Reach*, it will be customisable, allowing for both cosmetic and performance-enhancing choices. It's an 'evolution' of *Reach*'s Armor Abilities that 343 isn't yet ready to explain further.

It's not just the outer shell of the hero that's being worked on, either; it seems the studio is looking to build up Master Chief's character. "We wanted to pull the curtain back a little bit on Chief, and also his motivations, and a little bit of what's going on behind the mask in a way that's not disruptive for the player," says executive producer **Kiki Wolfkill**.

As humanity's saviour and a beacon of hope, 343 intends to make the iconic lead more emotionally resonant than the empty vessel of previous *Halo* games. O'Connor's quick to allay fears that he's going to drop the quiet and stoic thing, explaining that, "The Chief isn't going to become this monologue-spewing automaton."

The story this updated Master Chief stars in will have him facing a new, 'very dark' threat. The tone coincides with some of the intentions Bungie had for *Reach*, aiming to be more serious and 'visceral'. O'Connor is keen to put distance between the two approaches, though, suggesting that *Reach*'s tale of planetary destruction precluded levity. "Grinding tragedy all the time can be really exhausting," he says. "But, that said, even just technologically we're going to be doing things in a much more sophisticated, layered way. I'm not trying to say better, I'm just saying different and much less videogamey and bookendish, and much more cinematic."

But it's debatable how much the *Halo* series – for all of its creators' ambitions – is about story and how much it's about its legendary flowing combat and the virtual tourism element to its settings. Still, it's easy to see why 343 is heavily leaning on its revamped tale to sell the game and to try to reclaim the FPS crown. We just hope that it will be building on the cornerstones of *Halo*'s beloved gameplay as well. ■



Red vs blue

Multiplayer will be crucial to *Halo 4*'s success. "Our design goal is to dramatically reinvent the multiplayer experience – both the core element and surrounding modes," says Holmes. What we've seen of it, played across two maps with Battle Rifles, is faster than *Halo*s past, with UI flash such as 'headshot kill' and 'melee kill' prominently displayed. A hint at new modes comes with pointers to where specific weapons are. "There's a very specific reason why the sniper rifle was where it was and why you were being told that," O'Connor reveals. And it will also, apparently, attempt to explain the animosity between red and blue Spartans.

"The Chief has a really compelling story: he's the only single human to have saved the entire human race from utter destruction," O'Connor says. "So as an icon, a beacon of hope and an object of propaganda, he's really important"



Two new multiplayer maps have been shown so far. This is Warhouse, a human construction base for mechs that's custom made for Spartan IV's to duke it out in







Wraparound's a sunlight-generating Forerunner facility. The maps are presumably custom built so that we can't divine the campaign's location

HYPE



LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW

A touch of Hollywood helps cheer on Suda 51

Publisher	Warner Bros
Developer	Grasshopper Manufacture
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	June

Lollipop Chainsaw's lead character, Juliet Starling, dual-wields lollipops and a chainsaw in a case of say-what-you-see literalism. And in a case of a say-what-it-is analogy, lollipops and chainsaws perfectly represent the hyper-violent schlocky pop-culture fizz that serves as the beating heart to Grasshopper Manufacture's new game.

Grasshopper CEO **Suda 51** won't be drawn on its precise relationship to *No More Heroes*, saying it's a totally different game: "It does have the Grasshopper DNA instilled in it – if you find any link, it's the same creator." And yet *Lollipop Chainsaw* feels like a carefully pumped-up successor to Travis Touchdown's tale, substituting an otaku loser for an alpha cheerleader. It features much of *No More Heroes'* delight in the non sequitur and flashes of 8bit history. What's more, its thirdperson action is mostly melee-based, but faster and more flowing thanks to a leapfrog move that lends Starling more agility than Touchdown ever had, and gives her the chance to get behind the game's fast-striking enemies.

Different zombie types afford some strategy – some heft boomboxes that use music to hugely power up their rank-and-file brethren, meaning you'll have to take them out first in a brawl. Louche pompadoured guitar-wielding zombies in black leather boast a powerful swing to their axes, meanwhile, so you'll need to treat them with due care. In Starling's favour, and complementing her chainsaw attacks, she has an arsenal of cheerleading moves – the game's equivalent of light attacks – in which she uses pom-poms and acrobatics. The more light attacks you use, the greater the points reward if you use a finishing move on your target. Under the sheen, what we've played is familiar stuff; *Lollipop Chainsaw* may put the fun in functional, but seems unlikely to carry too many surprises with it.

Like so many Grasshopper games, much of its punch is down to the game's stylings

Instead, like so many Grasshopper games, much of its punch is down to the game's stylings and poise. Its macabre punk lunacy relates in some ways to last year's *Shadows Of The Damned*, which the studio made with Shinji Mikami. It also has a limited-ammo gun attack, useful for blowing up helicopters and flying-saucer-riding bosses (see 'Bust a groove'), and Starling carries the conscious severed head of her boyfriend, Nick, around her waist. In case you're wondering, his condition is the result of Starling's heavy-handed cure when he contracted the zombie disease: decapitation followed by a magical incantation. *Lollipop Chainsaw* is always keen to smear a bubblegum sheen over the gore, though. Rainbows and gold stars shower about as you carve up zombies, while wisecracks come thick and fast.

The game has been penned by **James Gunn**, the writer/director of Slither and Super, who has also had involvement in various Troma productions. He describes it as "Dawn Of The Dead meets the Powerpuff Girls," but that doesn't quite encompass its up-skirt shots and pixel graphic flourishes. Gunn came on to the project with the basic story setup and Starling's character more or less in place. "It was just a matter of me filling in the spaces," he says, which he did from the US while the game was developed in Japan.

"Even though she's a pop idol, she also kills zombies, so she has a dark side – I wanted to have a light and dark side in one character," Suda elaborates.

"Juliet's voice is my voice; the way she moves is Suda," Gunn explains.

Gunn's involvement has given Starling and her situation a dash of life around the breezy exploitation – he describes her as an eternal optimist, an "innocent girl to the point of ridiculousness. She was raised

Juliet Starling is on a quest to save her sister. She's voiced by Tara Strong, who played Harley Quinn in *Batman: Arkham City*

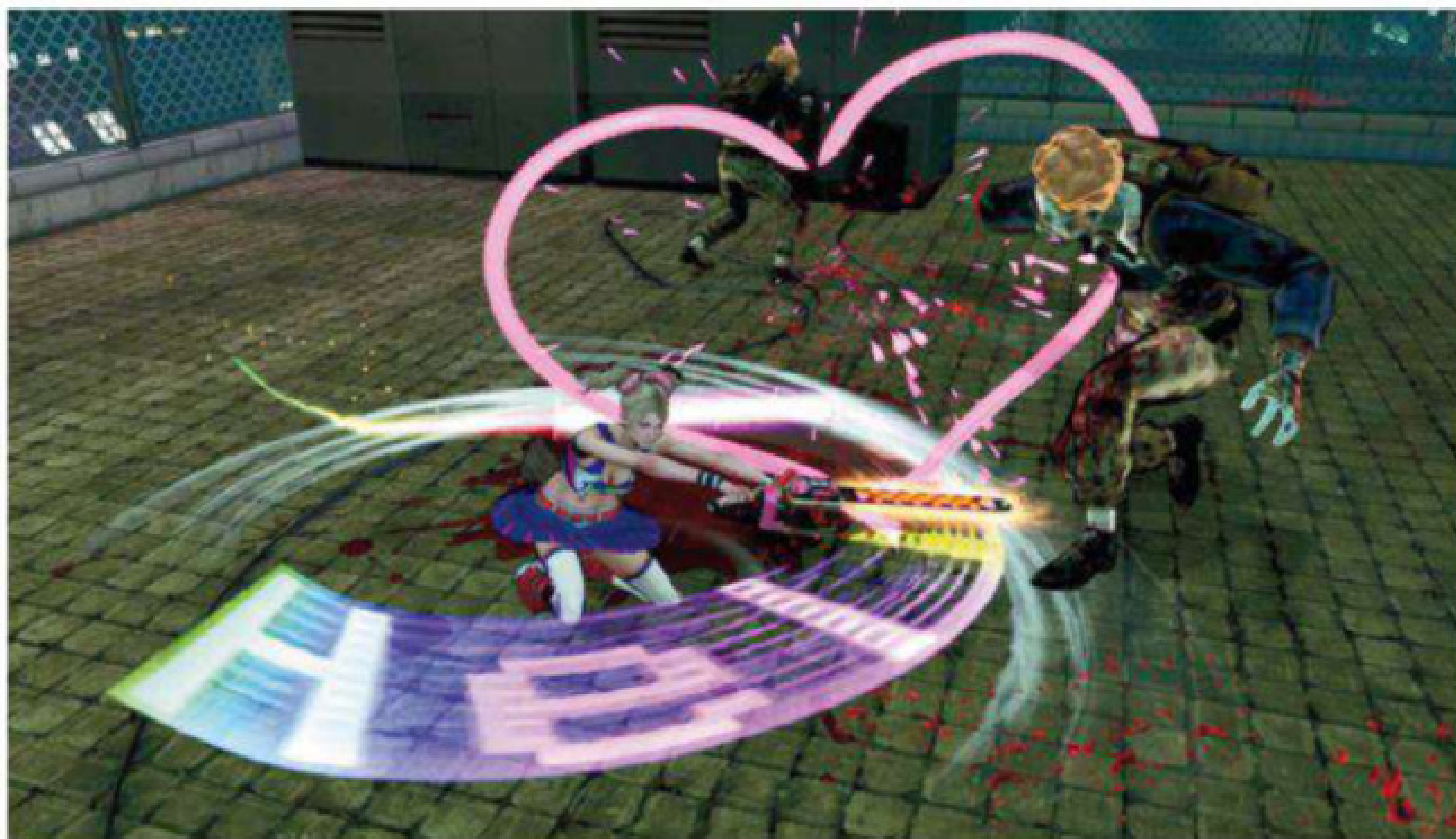


www.bit.ly/HfC8O0
Screenshot gallery



LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW

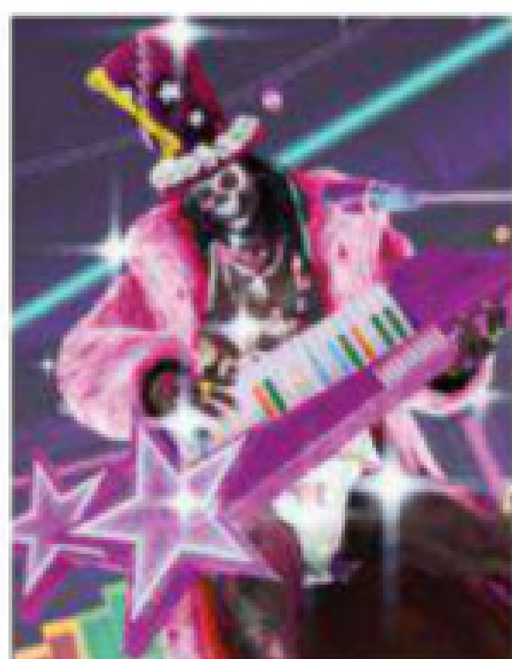
Over ten costumes have already been confirmed for Starling's wardrobe, including crossovers with manga series Highschool Of The Dead and Deadman Wonderland, among various other skimpy ensembles



as a killer of the undead – it's become a part of her life, as washing dishes would be to a Denny's dishwasher." And of her relationship with Nick, he explains, "She's such a weirdo and freak and overly positive that she sort of likes that he's a head. He's like a cool accessory to her. Of course, he doesn't have a penis, he's very upset and he does nothing but complain throughout the game – he's kind of a little bitch about it."

The game possesses another Suda 51 stalwart, the game-within-a-game, and very literally so. Starling is often sucked into arcade cabinets, whereupon the cartoon visuals turn to Tron neons. The sections we play involve a direct take on *Elevator Action* in which Starling must progress up 2D floors to a goal. There's a light puzzle element in working out how to cross a broken floor to access the next elevator – you must follow a series of almost rhythmic button prompts to acrobatically jump across the heads of a line of enemies on the floor below to reach the other side. And when you get to the goal, a giant cute dog's head appears and swallows Starling, so you must chainsaw it open from the inside before you return to the real world.

Such self-consciously surreal diversions are exactly what Suda 51's fans will expect from him, but they seem somehow more contained than the erratically whimsical flights of many of his previous games. It's probably because this game is tuned to appeal more broadly than anything he's made before. There's a reason why the otaku has become the cheerleader – a quest for popularity, and the media reach and ken of Warner Bros will surely prove a big help in achieving it. It's all encoded in its unambiguous title: there's no room left for referencing Stranglers albums, because Grasshopper's trying to cut a path to the mainstream with *Lollipop Chainsaw*.



Bust a groove

Each of the extravagant bosses is defined by a different musical genre, and all of the tunes players will be sawing this colourful cast apart to have been written by Jimmy Urine of fittingly eclectic electropunk band Mindless Self Indulgence. For instance, there's a top-hat-wearing, keytar-brandishing disco witch doctor (left), who sits on a flying saucer bedecked with two girls with skull heads and mohicans. Then there's Zed, a zombie punk voiced by Urine himself. *Lollipop Chainsaw*'s music and sound is headed up by Akira Yamaoka, however, who joined Grasshopper in 2010 and has previously directed *Silent Hill*'s sound design.

Q&A

James Gunn

Writer, *Lollipop Chainsaw*



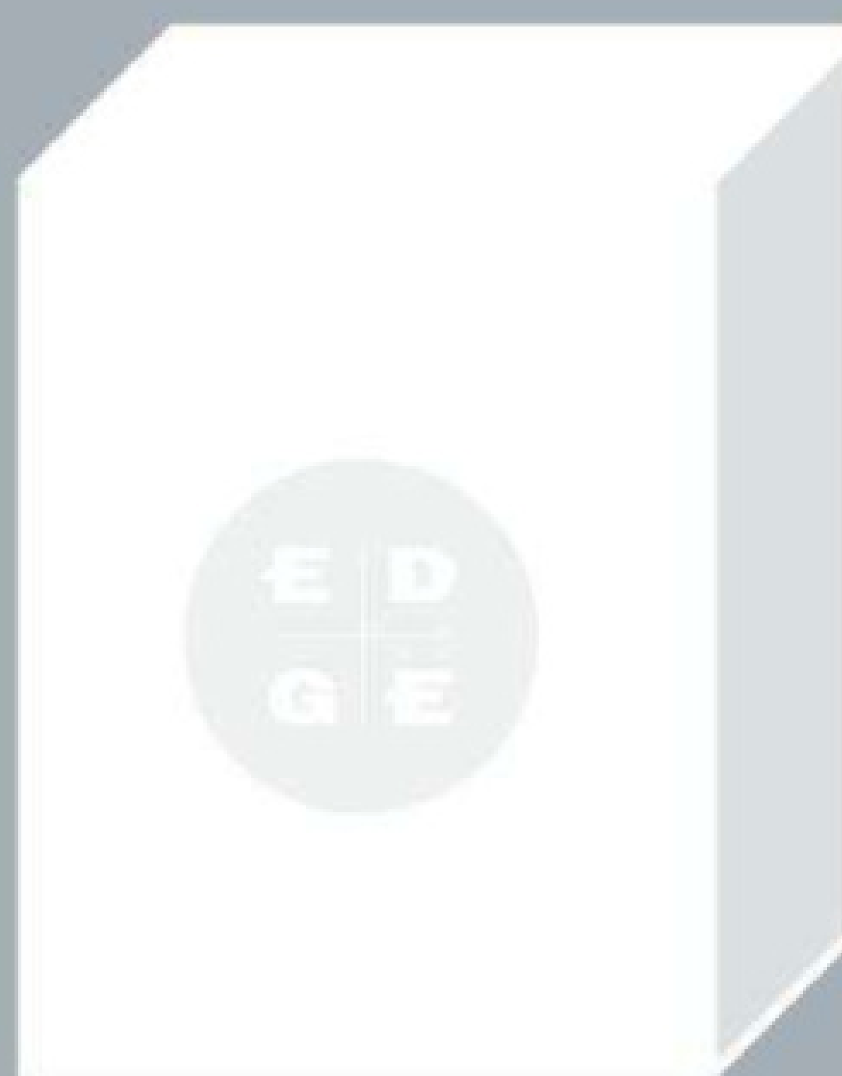
How did you get involved with the game?
Suda and Warner Bros called up and said they were working on a project, very secretive about everything. The movie business isn't like this – I had to sign all these forms and I got to see this bit of test footage with Juliet running around chopping up zombies with rainbows and hearts coming out, and I thought it was amazing. Aesthetically, I could see why they came to me – a mixture of the sweet and the profane, dark and light, [and] pop culture, and instantly I had to be a part of it. I'm a big gamer; I've wanted to do something with videogames for a long time and I wanted to learn from Suda, who I admired a lot.

As a director, you're used to creating characters and giving direction to actors. How did you deal with entrusting a lot of the process to Grasshopper?
I actually directed the American voice actors, and we based a lot of the action around their performances. But I had to trust the developers to stay true to the characters. I had very little, but some, input on the animation – there were times [when] I said things didn't quite work because of this and that, but I also trusted Scott Warr, the guy who was the liaison between me and Japan. There are some jokes in there that don't translate to Japanese – a lot of stuff, actually. So he had to make sure everything worked, beat-wise. Comedy's a very complex thing, so you're worried about the way somebody says something, the way different characters are cut together. Scott brought everything together. He was very good, sitting down with those guys and going through every little edit to make sure what we crafted got through.

There's a lot of incidental dialogue, too.
Yeah, when I was initially hired, it was for the cutscenes and the overall story, but I don't work that way and I went crazy and wrote every single bit of dialogue in the game. When Juliet gets kicked in the face, she's going to say one of 30 reactions, and I wrote all of them. Hopefully, some of them are funny! I found it remarkably [freeing] to just pour out dialogue. Movies are so small and contained – to be able to have this huge, open arena was fun. I honestly just loved it.

Do you think your involvement will help bring Suda to the west?
That's the thing: Suda and I are both cult guys. My hope is that somehow our 'cult-ness' comes together to create something that's still culty but also mainstream, so more people get into it.

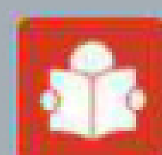
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RIGHT **The main game shown here will be supported by a mobile version, already running for iOS, through which players can direct their assault teams around in realtime. Future additions will include minigames for restocking supplies and dropping bombs onto live battlefields**



Not content with building a fabulously ambitious online browser game, Reto-Moto has developed its own 3D engine for it entitled Retox



H | Y
P | E

HEROES & GENERALS

Reto-Moto unleashes an ambitious blend of strategy and FPS

Publisher	Reto-Moto
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	Denmark
Release	TBC

As a free-to-play game, *Heroes & Generals* will be monetised by FPS players buying weapons and mods, and generals buying equipment for their assault teams

The concept of interplay between the multiplayer populations of different games is still an exotic one. CCP's FPS, *Dust 514*, has stood more or less alone as an attempt to have its online action influenced by the events in its MMOG, *Eve Online*. *Heroes & Generals*, however, is taking a different approach to the same idea by combining two different genres in the same game.

Developed by Reto-Moto, reformed by the founders of IO Interactive (see 'Origin story'), *Heroes & Generals* is both a strategy game and a team-based FPS. Its strategy portion has two teams of generals moving assault teams around a map in realtime during wars that will take four to six weeks to finish. One side begins in London, the other in Berlin, with each side's objective being to take the other's capital. FPS battles begin when one faction's commander moves an assault team into a location held by opposition forces. The resources at the ground teams' disposal will depend on the units the generals send in, from the number of players on each side to the number of respawns they get. A mechanised infantry assault team grants up to 55 infantry respawns and six APCs, while armour assault teams grant 15 tanks (with three in the field at any time) and 30 infantry respawns.

Battles sit in a mission list for FPS players to pick from, which indicates supplies in favour of or against their side, the units involved and the type of game (such as point-capture missions and deathmatches). These are then played out on large maps, which can span up to four square kilometres. Reto-Moto's intention is that good commanders will attract the best FPS players, particularly since they can buy better equipment for their troops. And if they have them available, they can even bring new units to live battles in order to swing the outcome in their favour. Rolling tanks into an existing game adds a new dynamic to the FPS, and particularly hotly contested battles could in theory last for hours, since reinforcements will refresh respawn counts. The design's unapologetically imbalanced: the war is meant to be attritional, formed by waves of respawns crashing against the other side, with victories being as much a result of smart strategic play as skilled action.

Heroes & Generals is currently in early alpha, and Reto-Moto is aiming the FPS portion of the game to hit a mark between realism, taking care over the likes of weapon ballistics, and arcade-like sensibilities, with the balance being fine-tuned through player feedback. There are also plans in the works to add singleplayer missions that will affect the overall war effort, requiring players to bomb a train, say, or use stealth.

Each war will take place in a world populated by – depending on how the upcoming beta works out – about a thousand players. Prospective commanders will buy their assault teams with in-game credits, earned through play or via real-world currency. Meanwhile, a command chain adds a social element in which subordinate commanders can choose superior officers with the ability to grant resupplies for their teams, with a high command of the faction's top ten generals sitting on top. The alpha features just two factions, Germany and the US, but Japan, Russia and more are due later.

The scope, then, is here for fascinating large-scale emergent play, formed by social interaction as well as in-game action. You could consider it a more accessible *Eve Online*, so at least some of its concepts are semi-tested. But with so many factors to consider, the balancing ahead may be fearsome. ■



Origin story

Reto-Moto, the Copenhagen-based developer behind *Heroes & Generals*, was originally founded in 1997 – and soon created IO Interactive in a joint venture with Nordisk Film. After selling the *Hitman* developer to Eidos in 2004, Reto-Moto's founders had to sit out a four-year non-compete clause before reforming the company in 2008. It's now staffed by a little under 30 developers, with many of the core team coming from IO. *Heroes & Generals*' music, for example, is being written by Jesper Kyd, who worked on many IO soundtracks, including *Hitman*'s, and has also scored the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Darksiders 2* and *Borderlands*.

RIGHT **Many secrets are apparently going to be hidden off the main trail, with Molyneux claiming that just one playthrough won't reveal everything *The Journey* has to offer.** BELOW **Much of the game's customisation will be reflected by your carriage, with you able to collect various trinkets in order to augment your ride**







We haven't seen any on-foot navigation yet, but Molyneux says you'll steer by leaning left and right, and explains that, "The most crucial thing in our minds is making you feel comfortable"

H | Y
P | E

FABLE: THE JOURNEY

How Lionhead plans to conjure up a worthwhile outing for Kinect

Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	In-house (Lionhead Studios)
Format	360
Origin	UK
Release	2012

F*able: The Journey*'s first appearance during Microsoft's E3 press briefing last year wasn't one of **Peter Molyneux**'s finest moments. Following widespread derision at what looked like an on-rails Kinect flailathon, he had those members of the press seeing it behind closed doors sign their names on a wall to confirm it wasn't in fact on-rails, and revealed that the project was just four months into development.

Nine months later, Molyneux's message remains steadfast: "It's very large and not very linear." But it's clear that exploration is largely tied to driving your horse and carriage along a network of roads across the game's expansive map. You're also free to stop at any time and explore on foot – which is the way you'll be traversing the game's temples and dungeons – but only if the environment allows it. There won't be much to see if you alight between a cliff and a sheer drop.



This is Lionhead's first motion-capture game and won't feature the reactive physical transformations of earlier *Fables*, because the animation tends to look wrong as your body shape changes

And rather than flailing, *The Journey* is about subtle movements. Holding the reins of your horse, Gabriel, in both hands, you snap them across his back to speed him up, pull to one side to turn and yank towards you to stop. The control scheme's indirect nature irons out many of Kinect's wrinkles, such as its twitchiness and imprecision, while also allowing the reins' physics-enabled looseness to lend you a sense of connection. And this is further enhanced by the way Gabriel's head will turn as you steer – his large, gleaming eye looking back towards you – and the way trinkets swing from the carriage's awnings.

"Most people overuse the reins, which does nothing," reveals Molyneux, who's otherwise at pains not to explain the system too much. But he is keen to emphasise that Gabriel is another of Lionhead's emotive AI-driven characters. Our carriage is soon attacked by bow-wielding hobbes on the roadside, who send a couple of arrows into Gabriel's side before pursuing us on horned pigs. "It's up to you how hard you push him," Molyneux says, encouraging us to snap the reins faster. We quickly escape down a path to the right and stop. Standing by Gabriel's side, with two disembodied hands on the screen before us, we can reach for the shafts and pull them free, the horse whinnying in pain.

Drive Gabriel too hard or mistreat him in other ways – you can push those arrows in deeper if you want – and his coat will lose its gloss, while his body becomes thin and scarred. "The thing that's pulling you through the world has feelings, feels pain and will eventually be scarred by the number of times you thrash that leather on its back," Molyneux says with typical enthusiasm. "If you go like that, you'll get exhausted yourself, and when you stop you'll see little dribbles of blood where the reins hit."

It's also a subtle trick to stop you from barrelling through the world and to have you listen to NPC chatter without arbitrarily taking away your ability to gallop if you so wish. "Having a living, pain-feeling simulated horse to refine those systems in a delicate way is wonderful, because I don't have to force you to slow down, I can emotionally blackmail you to slow down."

The Journey's gestural magic system exhibits similarly smart interaction design. Fizzing sounds and visual effects make firing off spells feel responsive and precise, but there's a lot of automated aiming going on, and it's not yet clear how deep the scheme will prove (see 'Magic fingers'). But the fact that the demo has us standing statically while enemies hover or dodge before us does chip away at the sense that we're engaged in a dynamic, interesting battle.

And therein lies the big issue: with the amount of choice we'll be able to enjoy outside of all the emotional blackmail, fixed roads and static battles still unclear, we don't yet know if *The Journey*'s simply going to be taking us for a ride. ■



Magic fingers

It's not yet apparent how much strategy lies in *The Journey*'s magic system, but some experimentation reveals it's more than simply flinging balls of energy about. A grab move based around the left hand allows you juggle foes them or fling them against the environment, while an energy spell on the right can either spam weak shots or gather power to create stronger fireballs. Throw them hard, and they will travel quickly; throw softly, and they move slower. You can even use your voice – angry tones power up your attack spell, and calm ones boost your left-hand spell – and pushing your hands together creates a super bomb.

HYPE

DEADLIGHT

An eerie zombie platformer lurching on its own path

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Tequila Works
Format 360
Origin Spain
Release Summer 2012

RIGHT **Randall may look pretty tough, but he's no superhuman. His movement is regulated by a stamina gauge, so you won't be able to sprint or leap for long before needing to rest**

Raúl Rubio, CEO of Tequila Works, is a man alert to the narrative straitjackets that can prevent zombie apocalypse scenarios rising from the grave as effectively as they might. "One thing you take for granted in a zombie game is that you're the hero and you're doing it because you're great," explains Rubio, who's also the creative director behind Randall Wayne, *Deadlight*'s protagonist. "But in this game, Randall tells the story, so it's not quite objective. He's not a hero, he's trying to survive and [he's] likely paranoid."

A 'cinematic platformer' Rubio is happy to admit is inspired by the likes of *Prince Of Persia*, *Flashback* and *Another World*, *Deadlight* plays on fixed perspective and framing. Set in an alternative 1986 Seattle, it delivers thrills of the gritty variety. The zombies are slow shamblers, but they'll grab Randall and kill him in just a couple of bites. Falls will also equal death, and weapons are never as effective as wits. The story is dark, too: Randall, an everyman who was a forest ranger in his native British Columbia, has been left behind by his group of survivors, having killed one of their number who he thought was infected. Some believe him, others don't, and he must catch up with them to set it right.

In other words, the game's objective isn't saving the world, and Rubio is keen to



www.bit.ly/GPJOrw
Screenshot gallery

The 1986 setting may be grim, but Tequila Works has clearly had some fun with it, placing minigames in the form of old handheld consoles in various secret areas

emphasise that *Deadlight* gives no answers as to the cause of its zombie infection. "Knowing what's happened isn't important," he states. "What's important is Randall's inner journey and how he faces his fears."

Much of the storytelling is performed by the richly detailed backgrounds, which encompass murky warehouse interiors and sewers as well as expansive outdoor scenes. The introductory credits sequence takes place as Randall walks beneath a highway interchange, mouldering cars and concrete stretching into the distance. The narrative was created by playwright Antonio Rojano, and as Rubo explains, "[Rojano's work] in theatre means it's a more flexible, dynamic and organic story that's told by the background of the world." However, it's also a tale delivered both by Randall's slightly over-boiled voiceover and via pages from his diary found scattered throughout the game.

As with many other modern platformers, *Deadlight* features a blend of physics-based puzzles and dexterity tests – very early on you find a warehouse with rotten floorboards and a heavy crate positioned above them, and you'll need to find your way up to access it. Randall's athletic and manoeuvrable, but no Superman, so his platforming stays broadly within the realms of reality. But while Rubio has been inspired by the punishing likes of *Another World*, he's anxious to ensure that the experience of playing *Deadlight* isn't quite so bounded by trial and error.

Randall's no Superman, so his platforming stays broadly within the realms of reality

Threat, though, is continual, with zombies coming in from both the foreground and background. One might pass as a shadow before you, while others stumble in through a gate in the distance, and you'll often need to manage them. Whistling can attract their attention to lead them astray, such as on to an electrified piece of ground during the early tutorial section we play. Sometimes you'll have weapons, such as an axe, but its slow swing can leave you wide open to attack. "If more than one zombie grabs you at the same time, you're dead. We want the player to avoid confrontation," says Rubio. Weapons, then, usually double as tools (axes break locks on gates) and the best option is often to run.

Deadlight isn't an expansive Metroidvania-style platformer, but Randall's abilities, which will grow over the course of the game, offer you a toolbox to deal with its challenges. At its best, you'll find yourself simply reacting to the surprise of zombies lurching out through the door you thought would lead to freedom. If it can build on its mix of instinctive survival and premeditated action, the game may well live up to its atmospheric setting. ■



Going to source

Tequila Works chose Washington State as *Deadlight*'s backdrop, for its forests and cityscapes. "Mountainous environments are beautiful and full of life, but make you feel small and alone," Rubio says. References include the obvious, I Am Legend and The Walking Dead, and the less obvious, such as Goonies and Rambo: First Blood, which prompted the 1980s setting. Parallels to the game's visual realism can be found in *Heavy Rain*, which its art director, César Sampedro, worked on. But Rubio doesn't mention The Road, with which *Deadlight* shares its washed-out palette. "We wanted clean visuals and to avoid brown colours," he says.

H | Y
P | E

STEEL BATTALION: HEAVY ARMOR

A claustrophobic war machine rumbles its way over to Kinect

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	FromSoftware
Format	360
Origin	Japan
Release	June





Sequences like this, in which an enemy drops a grenade in through your VT's hatch, could happen at any time if you fail to fully clear infantry from your path

ABOVE **Natch is a fragile soul – fail to fist-bump him and his morale may nosedive, causing him to panic during your next firefight and try to escape through the top hatch.**
RIGHT **You can go outside of your VT at any time to investigate locations in a firstperson view. A desert-set section has you searching for water canteens for your crew**





www.bit.ly/GTymbK
An interview with *Heavy Armor*'s producers

That one of gaming's most legendarily preposterous properties is coming to Kinect is both a case of delicious irony and keen pragmatism. One of the most hardcore games of all time – in the sense that it cost £130, demanded full command of a 40-button peripheral and continually threatened players with permanent death by intentionally wiping saves – *Steel Battalion* seems an odd bedfellow with Microsoft's bid for gaming accessibility. Cynics might write it off as a wild attempt to prove Kinect's value to core gamers, but *Heavy Armor* has managed to be much more than a mere marketing ploy.

You play as the veteran commander of a 'Vertical Tank' mech, or VT, charged with taking command of a crew in a future without computers because a microbe has eaten away all silicon. This has forced technology to regress to the analogue brute iron and steel of WWII. As with its predecessor, piloting your VT is a great deal more complicated than simply pushing forward on your control pad. In the place of the original controller, you use Kinect-powered gestures for your VT's esoteric functions (see 'Thoughtful gestures'), and a pad for its movement and aiming.

Sitting in the VT's cramped cockpit, your three crew members take positions around you. By swooping your hand horizontally, you can look at and interact with them. Directly to your left is the radio operator, behind him is the machine-gun loader, and to the right is your cannon loader. If either of the latter pair gets injured, they'll reload a lot slower. Your crewmates are highly characterised, and you'll be cultivating relationships with them in a variety of randomised and scripted events, from fist-bumping them after a victory to catching an apple in a cutscene. Their attitude and morale may falter if you fail to reciprocate their advances, which can result in your radio operator trying to escape through the top hatch during battle, say, meaning you'll need to pull him back inside. He can even get killed in the process, causing you to haul in a corpse. Once crew members are dead, they're gone forever – a nod to the original's permanent death – so on the next mission you'll be sitting next to a stranger or an empty seat.


The cockpit, with viewport above and radio operator to the left. Cluttered and often filling with smoke, the view underlines its cramped nature effectively

Crew interactions provide levity amid the battles, which effectively convey both the chaos of war and the claustrophobia of sitting inside a metal coffin. Your narrow viewport is often obscured by thick smoke from cannon strikes. It's also soon dirtied and cracked, and can blow out entirely, meaning you can be shot through it. Despite your VT's thick armour, you feel vulnerable; direct hits knock your aim off, blow out systems and set lights flickering and controls sparking. And then there's the chance that if you don't clear all the enemy troops, one might make it onto your VT's upper section and throw a grenade inside, necessitating a fumbling attempt to catch it and throw it out. Or he could climb down and kill a crew member if you don't shoot him with your handgun first.

The missions themselves face the typical problems of slow-moving tank battles: attritional firing and being hit until one of you goes down. Combining movement with aiming is next to impossible when the motion of your mech's legs throws your aim off – a detail that serves the simulation, if not roving, dynamic combat. The main tactic, beyond using procedural damage to take out enemy VTs' legs to immobilise them, is to move, fire, and then move again, which causes you to get hit significantly less but somehow feels rather arbitrary.

FromSoftware's idea is to extend the original game's scope from the cockpit's confines onto the battlefield itself, and early evidence suggests that it imparts the thunder of battle well. Most surprisingly, though, its use of Kinect largely seems to transcend gimmickry. If the stage is the battlefield, Kinect makes you master and commander. ■



Thoughtful gestures

Kinect is used for all functions aside from moving and aiming. Reach with your right hand to pull the chain to start your VT's engine, or pull down to open the viewport. Stand up and you stick your head outside to look around with the pad – at the risk of getting shot. Wave down and to the left to zoom into a panel with camera feed views around the VT if it's too risky to pop your head out. There are also pumps to vent smoke if your VT's set on fire, and shell types to choose. And there's the series favourite: the eject button. It all works well with short, clear movements, but get too fancy and the game may repeat actions.

HYPE

FABLE HEROES

Dolling up for a co-op smash through Albion's environs

Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	In-house (Lionhead Studios)
Format	360
Origin	UK
Release	TBC





Co-op brawling is ostensibly the point of *Heroes*, but it's every player for themselves in the battle to grab the most coins and to open chests first

ABOVE **Each character has different abilities: Garth can use ranged spells, Hammer's speciality is slow-but-strong melee, and Reaver has a gun.** RIGHT **Completing the main quest takes you to a harder, nighttime-set mode that uses the same levels but has even more aggressive enemies**





www.bit.ly/GByknW
Screenshot gallery

The player avatars in *Heroes* are presented as dolls of series characters, which are inspired by the dolls of the hero you find in other *Fable* games

Over the past eight years, the *Fable* series has woven a cultural tapestry of morality systems, gold hoarding, chicken kicking and a stout brand of toilet humour. But this has always seemed a specific fit with the kind of thirdperson adventuring that has defined the franchise thus far, so it was a surprise to learn that, alongside *Fable: The Journey* (p66), Lionhead's been making a co-op brawler for XBLA in the vein of The Behemoth's *Castle Crashers*.

It's even more of a surprise that *Fable*'s sensibilities perfectly fit the rough-and-tough nature of this genre, which rolls from cooperative to competitive on a moment-to-moment basis. In *Heroes*, up to four players, online or local, take on one of 12 characters from the series – including Garth, Reaver and Hammer – with the task of barrelling through the game's eight environments and collecting as many coins for themselves as they can.

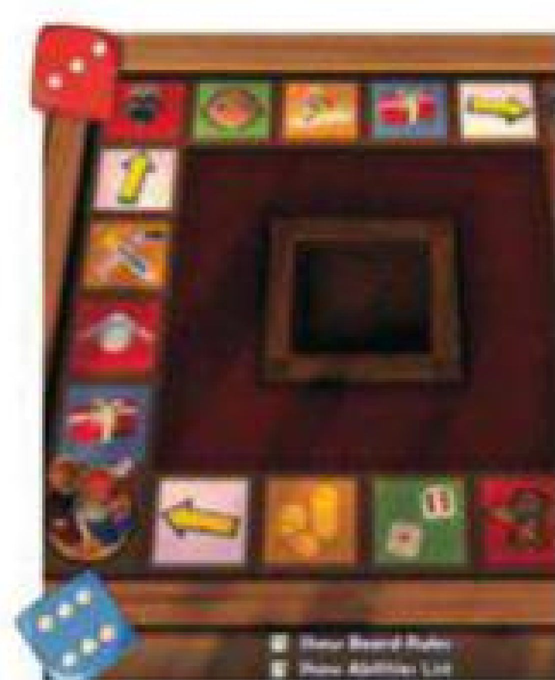
Coins, released by defeated enemies and by smashing up bits of the levels, are lent extra spice by amassing into stacks. These then combine into larger denominations, making the scramble to collect them all the keener. It's a trade-off: your comparatively slow pace makes gathering scattered small change inefficient, but dally for too long and you'll lose out to other players.

Adding further piquancy to the action are the chests you'll find lying along the levels' linear paths. Get to open them first, and you'll be granted a random effect, such as a big head or giant size. Some chests also allow you to choose a good or evil effect. Choose evil, for example, and one of your fellow players might be afflicted by a black cloud that costs them coins every few seconds. But if they touch another player while cursed, they'll pass their condition on, dissolving *Heroes* into a furious game of tag for a minute or so until the effect wears off.

Equipped with just light and heavy attacks, battling itself isn't subtle, but extra strategy is lent by expending health for more powerful blows with a press of the right trigger, while a dash move can help get you out of trouble. Still, the reality is that the chaotic nature of the action – with three other players, many enemies and even more coins onscreen – makes finesse largely moot. In fact, since the player avatars are too small to easily identify their silhouettes, it can be hard to keep track of who you're controlling. But such chaos is also part of the fun, because you *could* just hang back and hoover up coins. And even if you die, you simply turn into a ghost that's still able to battle but can't collect money.

Fable Heroes is the result of a prototype made for Lionhead's internal Creative Day, which we covered in **E228**. Lead designer **Ted Timmins**, previously a quest designer on *Fable III*, and artist Jon Eckersley came up with the concept of *Fable* meets *Gauntlet* and gathered a small team to work on the game in their spare time, all while making DLC for *Fable III* during the day. Creative Day was delayed, though, so in late February 2011 Timmins showed the game directly to Peter Molyneux, *Fable* franchise director Louise Murray and design director Josh Atkins. It was liked immediately, greenlit two days later and 15 staff were granted to the project.

Considering it's been in development for just over a year and it's being made by a new team, *Heroes* is full of smart features. In fact, Timmins says he's been able to cram in nearly everything he liked. "From my experience on previous *Fable* games, you don't always get to make all the features you wanted," he says. "To be able to ship them was awesome."



Level playing field

Levels are knitted together by an overworld, which is presented like a board game, with new sections opening up as you clear areas. The end of each level also gives you a choice over facing boss encounters or minigames, the latter being fare such as surviving exploding chickens for as long as you can, kicking them to keep you out of trouble. Completing levels takes you to a secondary board game, where your coins buy dice rolls that grant permanent character boosts, including speed and damage multipliers, effects when you kill enemies, and expressions, which you can apply during end-of-level podium score roundups.

JUST BEING THERE



No scores. No fail states. No challenge. Do games like Journey even deserve to be called games?

[F]ew questions in the discussion of videogames are more slippery than, 'What is a game?' Many have attempted to nail down a definition that's specific enough to be useful, while also being broad enough to be able accommodate the many forms that exist. But eventually, inevitably, every definition is met with a 'game' that tests its boundaries. Until recently, there were a few attributes that seemed so fundamental to what a game is that they appeared unquestionable: choice, interaction, challenge, and an emphasis on systems. Essentially, something to do.

But what if a game had no challenges? What if it prioritised audiovisual aesthetics over deep or complex mechanics? What if there was nothing to do but move across a map? Is that still a videogame?

Many traditional definitions would imply that it isn't. Even an inclusive one such as **Sid Meier**'s "a series of interesting choices" would seem hard pressed to count such software as a videogame. Yet several developers have recently begun to challenge these most fundamental of assumptions about what a game requires to be effective. They have crafted beautiful titles that, when played, undoubtedly feel like games, even as they struggle to fit within any preexisting definition. These games – some by intention and some by happenstance – push at the boundaries of not only what videogames are, but what they can be.

Thatgamecompany's *Journey*, **Ed Key** and **David Kanaga**'s *Proteus*, thechineseroom's *Dear Esther*: all these titles challenge the most basic assumptions of what a game is by doing away with any kind of challenge or conflict, and instead focusing almost exclusively on the player's movement through a world. Each differs greatly in tone, atmosphere and style, but the task for the player in all of them is, ultimately, to walk from a starting point to a finishing point. None pose any kind of real hindrance to progression, and of the three only *Journey* has even the simplest of puzzles.

Each game is entirely minimalist in its interactive design, and at first glance, all


Kellee Santiago is thatgamecompany's president as well as its co-founder, and helped steer the path that *Journey* takes

While the landscapes of thatgamecompany's *Journey* (pictured) dwarf the player's character, their oppressiveness comes not just from the sheer size of the world, but from your inability to effect much change. Instead, you must try to overcome them

"THE INTENT WAS TO MAKE YOU FEEL SMALL IN RELATION TO THE WORLD"

lack many of the elements we have come to believe a game 'needs'. Yet after playing them, you would struggle to argue they aren't games. So how do they still manage to feel like games? And what does that mean for the future of the medium?

The fictional world in which a game takes place is often seen as merely a backdrop for the player's actions. But in *Dear Esther*, *Journey* and *Proteus*, the world is brought to the fore. The pleasure they offer comes primarily, in some cases exclusively, from exploring and moving through virtual worlds.

"When we started developing *Journey*, we knew the intent of the experience was to make you feel small in relation to the world around you," says thatgamecompany's co-founder and president, **Kellee Santiago**. "The desert environment was a really great place to evoke that feeling, because it's such a vast and violent environment."

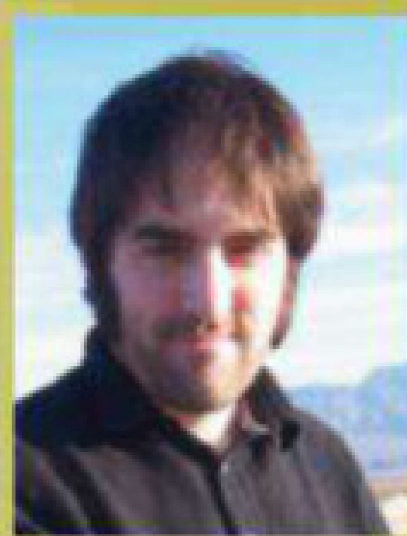
But more than the environment itself, how the player can and can't navigate it is paramount to their experience. "There are times in *Journey* when you walk very, very slowly through it, and then sometimes you can run super fast. We wanted to tune all of that to find a balance between these two states, where the player just takes it all in through a more contemplative mindset."

While *Journey* does also allow for a few more traditional game movements, such as jumping, both *Dear Esther* and *Proteus* lock the player into a slow walk for the duration of the game, almost requiring you to take in the world around you.

For thechineseroom's creative director and *Dear Esther*'s writer **Dan Pinchbeck**, this type of game is less about enforced walking and more about emphasising what he calls 'downtime'. "When all the stimulus [of combat and puzzles] drops away," he says, "something fills that space and it's usually the player thinking about stuff, reflecting on stuff. These quiet patches can give a massive boost to the type of emotional complexity that a game can [create]."

AN OLD QUESTION

Though several recent games have challenged what a videogame is supposed to represent, it is by no means a new undertaking. Tale Of Tales' *The Graveyard* (2008) puts the player in the role of an old lady walking excruciatingly slowly through a graveyard to sit on a bench, and then back out of the graveyard. Its short and minimal design piqued debate about whether it was really a 'game' or merely 'interactive art' in a similar way to *Journey*, *Proteus* and especially *Dear Esther* have today.



Ed Key is the indie developer behind *Proteus*. He worked in the game industry for nearly a decade before making it

[P]inchbeck originally made *Dear Esther* as a *Half-Life 2* mod in 2007, an experiment to see if this 'downtime' was enough to sustain a player experience without the usual trappings of puzzles and challenges. "I thought we were pushing our luck with an hour!" Pinchbeck admits. "I find it great that *Dear Esther* is like 90 minutes to two hours long, and I find it extraordinary that people are going back and putting 12 to 20 hours in replays."

Keeping players interested without typical gameplay features was a concern of *Proteus* developer Ed Key, too. Whereas *Dear Esther* and *Journey* both have clear, linear paths to follow, *Proteus*'s open, procedurally generated island gives no hint as to where to go or what to do. The impetus to explore and to discover the game's goals is put entirely on the player.

"We wondered if we had to add more gameplay things," Key recalls. "Why will people want to play *Proteus* for more than five minutes?" Initially, he thought he might need to create things for the player to do in order to keep their interest. "People say that just messing around is only fun when you're meant to be saving the world."

David Kanaga, who wrote the music for *Proteus*, disagrees with that notion. "I don't buy that," he says. "Obviously, I think *Proteus* is better without any kind of goals, but even in life I'm not sure it's better to dick off and play only when you are meant to be doing something. That seems like a real rigid work/play fetishism divide. I can do whatever I want in the whole world, and that's a really meaningful task."

Ultimately, players do find their own reasons to keep playing *Proteus* without any sort of challenge or guidance whatsoever. "People have gotten so much more engaged than I ever expected," Key says.

Most games offer some kind of extrinsic reward separate from the experience of play itself, be this in the familiar forms of points, upgrades or unlocks. For *Journey*, *Dear Esther* and *Proteus*, exploring becomes a reward in and of itself. It's an intrinsic, emotional pleasure that blockbuster games rarely

Whereas *Journey* and *Dear Esther* direct their players to a known destination, Ed Key and David Kanaga's *Proteus* (pictured) merely presents a digital island to explore. This places the impetus on you to unearth the gameworld's goals as well as its secrets

attempt to capture but sometimes stumble across by accident, or introduce small moments of. "I was playing *Skyrim* and I came across this massive mammoth graveyard," Key recalls. "I was so amazingly satisfied that nothing popped up to say, 'You found this!' It just really made me happy that it wasn't the start of a quest or anything."

Perhaps, then, what this trio of games does is not so much remove gameplay's usual rewards and actions, but distil them down and embed them in the experience of traversing the gameworld itself. "I don't see how being a more embedded, intrinsic reward opposed to a number counter makes it not a videogame," says Santiago. "We very much pour game design into our experiences. It's really just a different application of those same mechanics."

For Santiago, what all these games have in common is that the player's progression is not tied to an increase in or the execution of power over some enemy force. "It's more like [the player's] progress is actually a process of understanding, or awareness, or personal contemplation, or transcendence. These are experiences of progression we could have in our own lives."

By emphasising the gameworld and its representations over the player's ability to affect it, these games shift the focus away from our ability to speak, and towards the opportunity to listen to what the game wants to tell us. With the medium being concerned almost exclusively with player choices and agency until just recently, it's a possibility space few videogames have ever considered exploring, but one that these games are taking the first steps into.

"Videogames have long used certain styles of combat, controls, competitive or cooperative styles of play. What happens when you get rid of those?" muses Santiago. "What are those games? For me, that possibility space is enormous. There's all sorts of games you can make without any of those kinds of mechanics, and I think that is what we are seeing now."

Key echoes those sentiments as well: "It's worth arguing for *Proteus* to be called a game so that the idea of what a game can be is less constrained."

This is what this new movement of so-called 'walking games' achieves that attempts at defining the medium can't. While definitions are preoccupied with what videogames 'are', a new generation of developers is asking what a videogame can be when such definitions aren't just ignored, but consciously resisted.

"Maybe it is a kind of conceptual shift," Pinchbeck notes. "Maybe people will stop thinking of these downtimes as slack that need filling up, and instead as active gameplay tools we can use to craft different experiences. I don't know if games like *Proteus*, *Dear Esther*, or *Journey* contribute to that conversation, but I'd feel very honoured to be a part of that."

SPACE TO BREATHE

Systems or mechanics have long been held as being central to what a game is. However, in *Proteus* and *Dear Esther*, the player is capable of exactly the same interactions, yet the games are vastly different. Key mentions that when he heard of *Dear Esther*, he worried it was going to be too similar to *Proteus* until he actually played it: "It's amazing what different spaces the two games occupy. It shows what an unexplored space there is in the world of games that two games can sound the same, but really they are just two points in this huge unexplored space."

["I CAN DO WHATEVER I WANT. THAT'S REALLY MEANINGFUL"]

Q&A

Dan Pinchbeck
Dear Esther's writer and creative director



While Key insists that *Proteus* was never meant as a manifesto, Dan Pinchbeck's *Dear Esther* was definitely intended to challenge expectations of what a game could and couldn't be. Starting life as a *Half-Life 2* mod in 2007, thechineseroom came together to revamp *Dear Esther* as a standalone title. After selling 50,000 copies in its first week and going on to win the 2012 Independent Games Festival award for Excellence In Visual Arts, it would appear many agree with his statement.

What did you think you could express by making a game this way?
I guess it just dates back to that question of going, 'Well, what if?' I've never believed in that traditional separation of story and gameplay. I think a game exists to sculpt an experience for a player, and there's a whole bunch of different tools you can use to do that. You can use different tools in different sequences in different amounts to achieve it. If achieving that means you need a lot of fast-moving gameplay, then you use that, and it if means you need to have no or minimal gameplay, then you use that. But it's still game design. It's just different toolsets.

So around the time that the original *Dear Esther* mod came out in 2007, in games academia there was an awful lot of people claiming what would and wouldn't work theoretically, and that really pisses me off. I'm more like, 'Put your money where your mouth is: build and test it.' So I thought, 'I have to do that and test stuff out.' So we asked ourselves, 'If we take a firstperson game and we remove all traditional gameplay from it and just leave a world and a story, is that going to be enough for people to play?' That was it, and it was.

By removing traditional gameplay, games such as *Dear Esther* seem to highlight the importance of audiovisual aesthetics, putting them on par with mechanics as just different toolsets.
Absolutely. If you went to an orchestra and said, "Right, you all have to play Beethoven, but you have to do it on banjos," it's not going to be Beethoven in the same way. The way something is represented or produced is fundamental to what it is. The idea that you can go, 'There's this structural thing and you can just wrap this representation stuff that doesn't actually matter on top of it,' is just crap. It's got no basis in reality.


***Dear Esther* also challenges preconceptions of 'good' game design by being a highly linear experience. What does it gain from following that path?**
I was coming out of school just as the PlayStation was coming out, and I was a huge survival-horror fan. For me, five hours of completely linear, completely scripted gameplay with no divergence, no replay, or anything like that was still a fucking great experience. You would go back and you would play them again and again, because they were still great experiences. So I think that linearity gets kind of maligned. I want someone who's a brilliant writer and a brilliant director to give me a good experience. I don't want to screw it up by making the wrong decision myself. I think that there's this myth whereby making something non-linear or open you automatically make it better, and that's just obviously completely flawed. You can do different things with it, but no, a perfectly sculpted linear experience is great for me. I love them. ■

Dear Esther takes place in and underneath a stark Hebridean island, and you discover its tale through a series of letters. It was originally made as a mod before being given this gorgeous makeover

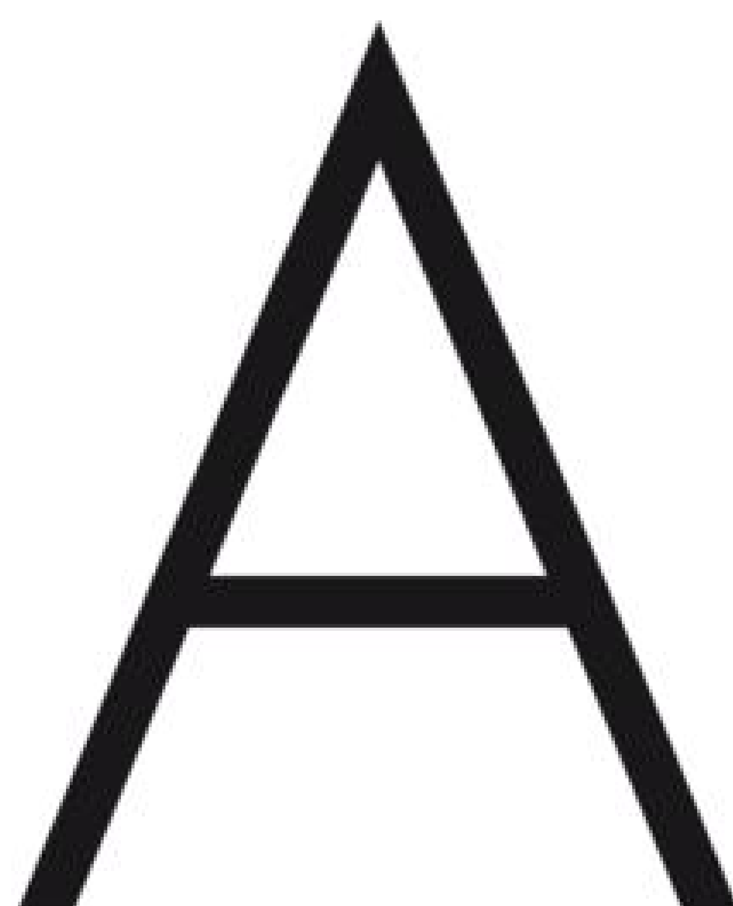
AN AUDIENCE WITH…

DAVID CAGE

We talk to Quantic Dream co-founder David Cage about creating Kara, gaming's inheritance from cinema, and the continual evolution of an emotional medium



"I'm in a phase in my career reality. I work on realistic characters... but I don't see



A girl is being assembled before us, her suspended head plugged into a column of chrome and white plating as mechanical arms weave and whir around her torso. This is Kara, the eponymous star of a seven-minute-long short film shown at GDC, which has been designed to illustrate Quantic Dream's new engine and motion-capture tech. And as Kara undergoes the epiphany of sentience, we suspect that it is also a metaphorical mission statement for the kind of empathy the company wants to elicit in its future games.

This demonstration isn't a clip from any such future project, however, but a non-interactive video captured from a PS3 that's rendering it in realtime. Nonetheless, it's clear that Quantic Dream remains intent on pursuing a game development philosophy that places primacy on the narrative art. There has been no more enthusiastic proponent of this than **David Cage**, Quantic Dream's co-founder, creative head and the writer/director behind *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* (simply *The Nomad Soul* in Europe), *Fahrenheit* (AKA *Indigo Prophecy*), *Heavy Rain* and Kara. Yet Cage is more conciliatory in his GDC talk and during our interview than he has been in the past, striking a measured tone, and taking pains to endorse alternative approaches to his cinematic method.

Being a non-interactive showcase, Kara is just about cinema, of course, and it's certain proof that Quantic Dream not only has technologists beyond par, but a skill at extracting performances from real actors and projecting them onto ever-more-lifelike avatars. Indeed, it uses the same approach as James Cameron's Avatar, and is as close to escaping the Uncanny Valley as we've yet seen. In a matter of years, Cage says, no one will talk about the Uncanny Valley at all, instead operating from a unified technological platform that makes the engine arms race irrelevant. Creativity and talent will be where the money is spent. We begin our interview by asking just what kind of games he believes that future will produce.



CV

Now 42, David De Gruttola came into the game industry as a professional musician, scoring such games as *Cheese Cat-Astrophe Starring Speedy Gonzales* and *Timecop* (1995). Adopting the pseudonym Cage, he co-founded Quantic Dream in 1997, going on to write, direct and design its subsequent projects: *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* (1999), *Fahrenheit* (2005) and *Heavy Rain* (2010).

Do you think that narrative games are the end goal of the medium?

No, I think emotion is the end goal, and there are many ways of achieving emotion. We can do it using storytelling, which is what we try to achieve. Or you can look at *Journey*, for example. It's a very different approach, but the goal is still to create emotion and get emotional involvement from the player. People are trying many different directions, but I think emotion is the goal – storytelling is just the means.

Can mechanics by themselves generate emotion, or does that require a context and aesthetic?

I think that you can use mechanics to create emotional engagement. Again, that's not the way I choose, but there are different ways of doing it in games, and I've got nothing against those games.

There are dogmatic people out there who'd say that to make the most of the medium we should be focusing on the things that are unique to videogames, and rejecting the things we've inherited from film. What would you say to them?

In general, I don't like dogmatic people. I think every time someone has a very strong paradigm and is really adamant about it, I usually think he's wrong. So, different people, different tastes, different ideas, different visions – it's a big open space, there's plenty of room for everyone trying different things, and if they can find an audience then that's fine. So I think that's wrong, and it's also about ignoring the history of arts in general by imagining you can create something from nothing.

When you look at films, when you look at TV, theatre, literature, or even painting and photography, nothing is created out of nothing. They got inspired by other media. When the first photographers appeared, they were inspired by painters. When the first theatre pieces were written, they were inspired by the aural tradition: people sitting round a fire and transmitting stories from one generation to another. [It's the] same thing with games. Don't try to build something out of nothing: it's not possible, and it doesn't make any sense.

where I try to copy worlds, with realistic this as a final goal"



You said in your GDC talk that game makers will be spending more on actors and talent than on tech, but that point seems like it will be some way off, given that a new generation of consoles is imminent.
I don't think it's going to happen next year, or even the year after. That's more of a hope I have. Technology progresses, but it's all about displaying more polygons, or having higher texture resolutions. And that's fine, but year after year you discover you do pretty much the same thing. You just improve your engine and optimise it, then move to a new engine and optimise it again. But there will be a point in the future – maybe this is ten years from now – when we have ultra-realistic rendering and there won't be any more you can do about it. You'll have channels and optics and lens flares – all that stuff that you can do will be available at some point. And then it will be interesting to start developing along with hundreds of developers on an agreed standard of technology, so we can stop spending money, time and resources developing stuff that has no value. We're not there yet, because having a better engine than your competitors is an advantage for your project in the minds of many people, but one day.

The Kara short you showed was captured from a PS3, but is the engine behind it something that will transfer across to the next generation?
I don't really believe in engines that can be ported to a new platform. If you want to create a great engine on one platform, then build it for the platform. So all the methodology, all the ideas, all the philosophy behind the engine is portable to any platform, but [not] the code itself. If we get new hardware, then we'll probably do a new engine. But in 15 years I think we've developed seven or eight different engines on different platforms, so it's not a big challenge. It's just time, and when you change hardware, you make sure you make the right choices, you choose the right architecture.

You said the demonstration showed the engine at something like 50 per cent of what you have now. What kind of things have appeared in the interim?
We've worked on light a lot. And we developed a system of shaders reacting to light depending on the material. So stone doesn't reflect light the same way as wood; each surface has a certain way to react to light. It made a huge difference to us. Visually, it's really surprising. We've worked a lot on cinematography to improve the depth of field, to work on bokeh [a term that's used to refer to the aesthetic quality of blur in out-of-focus areas of an image, and the blurry artefacts you see when a camera lens renders out-of-focus points of light]. It sounds boring when you describe it, but when you see it it's, "Wow!" It's technical stuff, but it's more colours in our palette, in a way, more stuff we can play with to create different atmospheres.

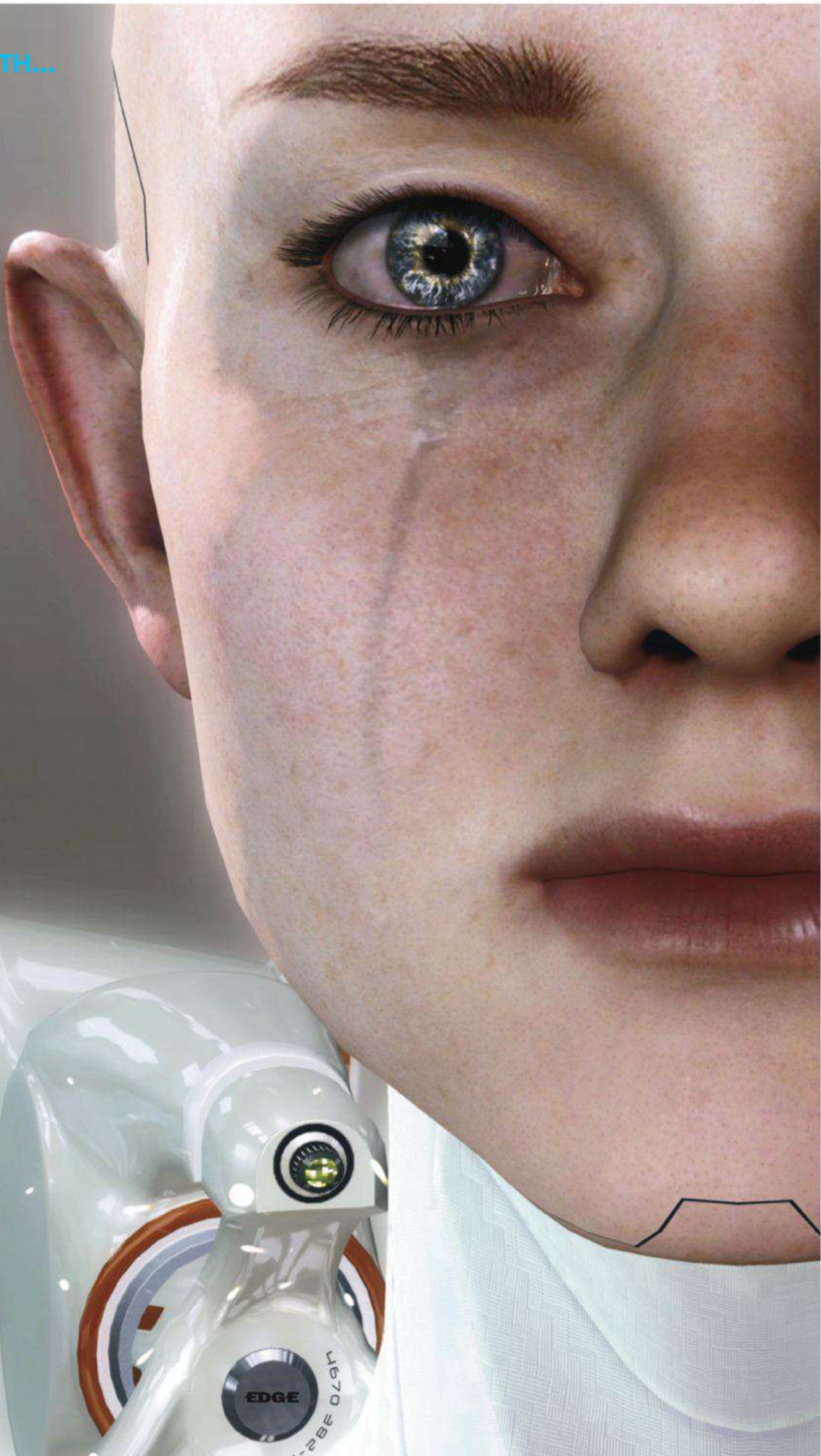
Bokeh's interesting, because it's very ingrained in the language of film, a result of the nature of lenses. Obviously, with games you have the opportunity to discard the lens entirely. Is there a temptation to develop a new way of looking at things?
It really depends what you do. I'm in a phase in my career where I try to copy reality. I work on realistic worlds, with realistic characters, and I try to understand what cinematography means. But I don't see this as a final goal, I see this as my story. I want to understand it so I can move forward and invent our own language. But before creating something, you need to understand the state of the art. At the moment, I'm really interested in cinematography: what works, what doesn't, and the basic rules behind all this. And playing with optics and lenses is very interesting.

How much of the level of fidelity shown in Kara is dependent on the size of the environment? Does your game engine determine the size of the gameplay space, and thus the kind of game you can make?
It's not really related in any way. We can have an open world with the same quality. Hopefully, we'll demonstrate it soon.

Going back to what you were saying about concentrating on getting the right talent for your games, do you have a list of actors you'd ideally like to work with if you were given an unlimited budget?
Yeah, definitely. But it's not really that I want to work with ➋

Kara's face and voice is provided by Valerie Curry, who's soon to be seen in the next Twilight movie. She was one of the 70 actresses to audition for Cage, but he knew that he had the right one immediately. "She's naturally an android!" he chuckled to the GDC audience

One of the goals for Quantic Dream was to make the motion-capture data as malleable as possible. Cage says that it can now get the data from stage to engine within 24 hours. Impressive stuff, but, as Cage points out, "Tech is the pen to write the book. It doesn't write the book for you"

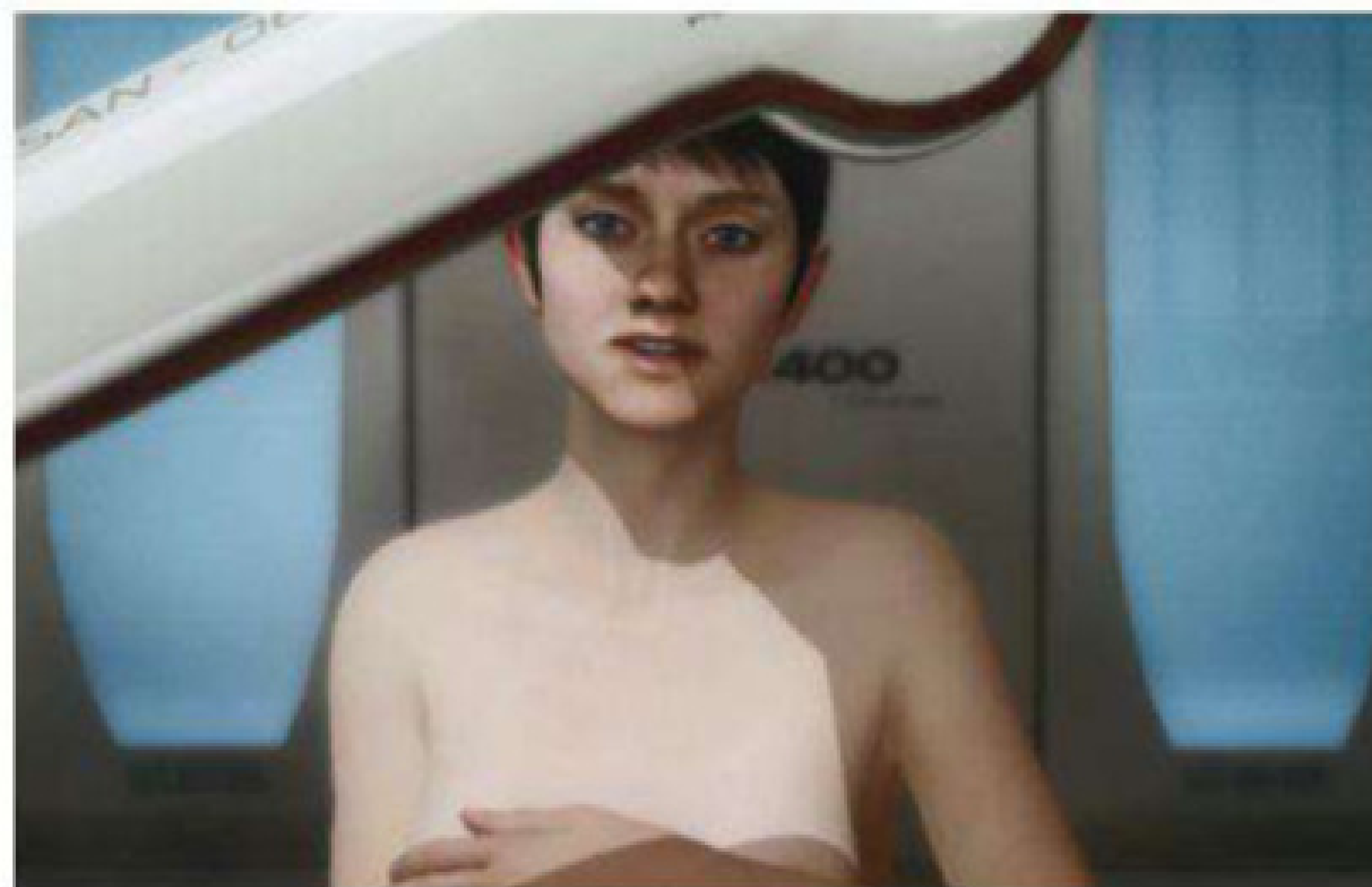


"In the world of games, so little has been made so far that it's like an empty space"

specific actors, it's really based on the script and the role. Very often when I write something, I have images in my mind and the face of an actor emerges from the script directly. And then you start talking to the agent and seeing if [they're] available or interested, and then it's a process. But there are so many amazing talents in Hollywood. And I'm not talking about big names to put on my pack shot as a marketing thing; I'm really talking about people with a real talent that they could bring to our medium.

Civilization creator Sid Meier's GDC lecture talked about how useful genre can be in setting out familiar rules for players, but do you think we're at risk of stagnating in the genres we have?
You know, I think you could create games in nearly any genre. I think there's no limitation. We have a very powerful medium, and we can do much more with it. And it's my battle to convince people that, yeah, it's great to shoot and jump on platforms, but there are so many other things you could do with interactivity. There are so many things to invent and create and imagine; why are we repeating the same patterns again and again and again?

In terms of narrative, do you also try to go for genre hybrids? After all, *Fahrenheit* was a mixture of thriller, sci-fi and police procedural, and *Heavy Rain* was a psychological drama, but had some surprising sci-fi elements in it as well.
I don't really think about genres. The more it goes, the more I want to talk about things that are interesting to me. Genres become secondary in a way. I really feel that *Heavy Rain* was the end of a chapter for me. It was really about exploring a very well-known genre, a dark thriller in the vein of Seven, Silence Of The Lambs, and all that stuff. I've said what I had to say about that, and learnt what I had to learn, and it's done. I think I'm ready to move to something else, something that is less related to an existing genre, something that is hopefully original. But I'm moving on step by step. And I'm really humbled in the sense that I know what I have to learn, and I'm just making games to learn, and getting better, game after game.

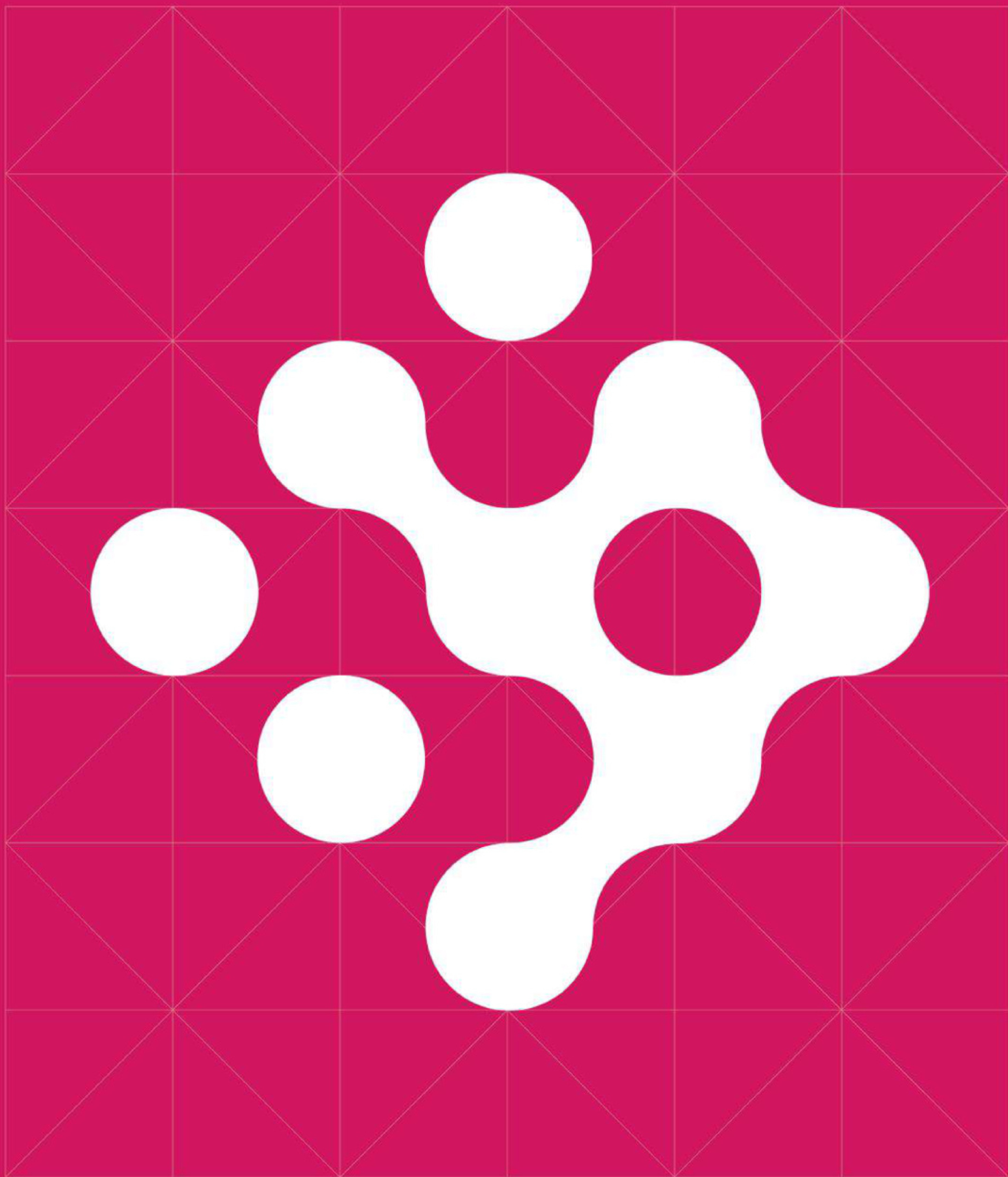


Kara touches on a lot of very relevant themes and the ideas of identity, transhumanism and sentience. What sort of themes are interesting to you as a writer now?
So many things. In games, so little has been made so far [that] it's like an empty space. You can try something and discover that no one's ever talked about it in a game. Whereas, if I were a movie maker, it would be much more difficult to find something unique. A movie that's never been made, or a book that has never been written – that's very challenging. But in games, this industry has been about shooting monsters for 20 years, and there are so many other things we can do than that. It's like an empty field. There are so many important, emotional themes that I want to talk about.

The more it goes, the more I want to talk about personal things. I did *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*, and it was about sci-fi, and *Indigo Prophecy* was about... something. I'm not exactly sure what it was about [laughs]. And then *Heavy Rain* was really about me becoming a father. And suddenly it makes a lot of sense, it becomes obvious to talk about this, because suddenly you can be sincere. You write about something you know to a certain extent, or at least the starting point; something you've fumbled with, something you felt deep in your heart. And it's much easier to do this than to talk about being a rookie in the Second World War. How sincere could I be writing about that? I can only imagine what it was like. But the more it goes, the more I want to write about things I experience myself... It's the best work I can do. ■

IF THE MO-CAP FITS

Cage's GDC talk traced his company's progress with motion-capture techniques. Quantic Dream's first two games matched facial rigging to a series of phoneme shapes. In *Omikron*'s case, the different mouth movements could be triggered by pressing different notes on a MIDI keyboard, while *Fahrenheit* employed a puppeteer to change mouth shapes and expressions using a pair of specially rigged gloves. *Heavy Rain*, meanwhile, favoured 'split performance', where voice and face are recorded in one session and body movements in another. Now, Cage says, Quantic Dream has achieved true actorly freedom by employing full performance capture, which obviously records everything in one pass, but is expensive.



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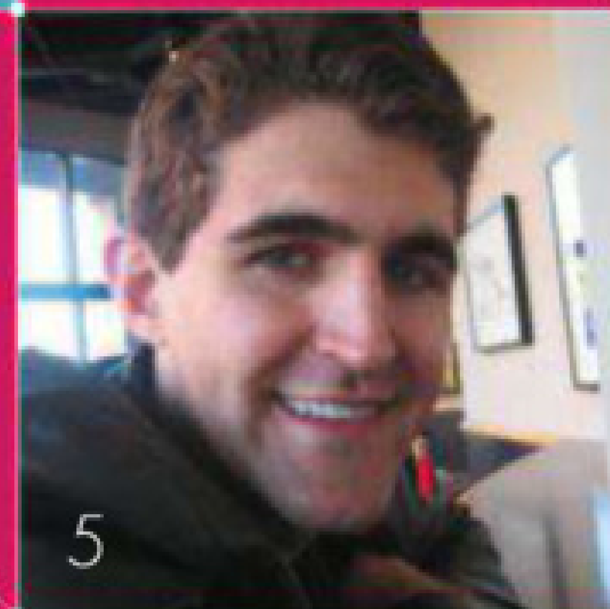
New York University's new MFA programme in game design aims to redefine the understanding of videogames and how they fit into wider culture











1 Frank Lantz is NYU Game Center's director, and will head up its new MFA. He's also the creator of *Drop7*.
2 Eric Zimmerman is a Game Center instructor and was listed in The Hollywood Reporter's Digital 50, along with *Sims* creator Will Wright.
3 Joseph Olin is part of the faculty of the University Of Southern California's Interactive Media Division.
4 Jesper Juul is a visiting professor at NYU as well as a widely respected author.
5 Jonathan Zabel was in the first class to have graduated with a games specialisation from USC

ast December, New York University announced that it would be offering a Master Of Fine Arts degree in game design from the autumn semester of 2012. Game design programmes have flourished at universities around the world, from the vocationally oriented DigiPen and Full Sail University to the more academic- and research-centric IT University Of Copenhagen and Savannah College Of Art And Design. NYU's programme, however, aims to have a transformative effect on how games are understood as a part of culture. As with the advent of film schools in the late 1920s, the acceptance of game design as its own artistic tradition by one of the world's most recognisable universities could be a watershed moment, a point at which the creative and commercial growth of the form accelerate toward cultural dominance.

"When this opportunity came along, I jumped at it," explains **Frank Lantz** in his office at NYU's Tisch School Of The Arts. "I loved the idea of being able to lay the foundation for a serious approach to games as a field. I really wanted to try to do something coherent, instead of just carving a little corner for games out of some other programme or discipline. We wanted to build a programme about games from the ground up."

> **"Games are best understood as a cultural form, like literature"**

Lantz is the director of the NYU Game Center and the head of its MFA. He's also the respected creator behind *Drop7*, *Parking Wars* and *Pac-Manhattan*, the latter being an exemplar of his theory of 'big games', which seeks to break concepts of play free from the TV screen and move them into the real world on an epic scale. Plus he's the creative director of Zynga New York (formerly Area/Code), a company he co-founded in 2005.

Lantz and his longtime friend **Eric Zimmerman** first began teaching at NYU's interactive telecommunications programme (ITP) in 1997. "It was a great programme, and very hands-on," Lantz says, "but games weren't a big part of their identity." Lantz and Zimmerman convinced ITP-founder Red Burns to let them teach game design as a small part of the overall curriculum, something that would evolve into the Game Center. But they both hoped a time would come when it could be a standalone programme that wasn't subsidiary to another discipline's curriculum and praxis.

"[Games] aren't best understood as a subset of technology, they're best understood as a cultural form, something like music or literature," Lantz says. "I think that's starting to feel more and more natural now." And so, after more than a decade of teaching, Lantz and Zimmerman put together a pitch for the game design MFA. Although they faced some scepticism, their plan was approved.

"We have more of an art school or film school approach," says Lantz. "You're going to learn how to make these things, and not in just a technical way; you're going to think about what it really means to make a game. That means developing an advanced theoretical understanding, but also getting hands-on practice that helps [you] understand why you make these things, what your voice is, what your contribution to games and art is going to be."

The first year of the programme will build a historical and cultural understanding of videogames based on a games 101 class, a survey of everything from The Royal Game Of Ur to *Gears Of War*. Students will also take game studio classes, where they'll form small groups to plan, prototype, and produce short games. The second year focuses intensely on thesis projects, which should typically be a game ready for public release by graduation. "I want [students] doing work that's strong enough that it goes beyond the walls of the programme, is winning awards, making headlines, and starting to make an impact," Lantz says. "You're making a finished game that you're proud of, and that's the best work of your life."

The first-year game studio course will be similar to a class currently taught by Zimmerman to a mix of undergraduate and graduate students at ITP. Like Lantz, Zimmerman is an accomplished game designer, author, and he's also a co-founder of Gamelab, a New York design studio that closed in 2009. Zimmerman's physical games have appeared in the Museum Of Modern Art and the Kai Lin Art Gallery. He has also collaborated on the recent Deepak Chopra Kinect game, *Leela*; created many board and card games; and designed a huge number of digital games for partners such as Disney, PBS, Fisher Price and HBO.

"The way that designers show respect for each other is through tough and honest criticism," Zimmerman tells his students in a class we're observing, which is part of a course entitled Game Development: Project Studio. "You're the doctor, you're listening to the symptoms and you have to ask yourself why people are responding to the game in the way they are. But don't get trapped into thinking you have to take everybody's advice."

During the first week of the course, students form groups and work on finding a concept for their game. The next three weeks are spent building rapid prototypes for their ideas, and two weeks after that they are expected to have taken their game to alpha stage, so that it is playable from start to finish. From there, the students work to refine the game's mechanics and balance, complete the art, finish its animations, finalise the soundtrack, settle on features, and test it for bugs.

Every week, students present their progress, sharing everything from the basic design document to art references and research, early prototypes, and levels in progress. There is no talk of market forces or appealing to 'gamers'. Instead Zimmerman guides students through a sort of consciousness raising. "Visual design is unconscious for players in a game, just like editing is unconscious for the audience in a movie," he tells the class. "But for game designers, we have to become conscious of it."

T













1+3 **The Game Center is active in the community, hosting open play sessions where students' games are presented to the public.**
2 **The Game Center is located in NYU's Tisch School Of The Arts on the edge of Greenwich Village.**
4+6 **It's not just games that are lovingly designed at NYU – even the lecture series get attractive art.**
5 **The Game Center frequently hosts guest lecturers. Past guests have included Chris Hecker, Erik Wolpaw and Tim Schafer.**
7 **Play is an essential part of the curriculum at NYU, and it's established one of the biggest libraries of games in the entire US**



www.bit.ly/GM2sky
Q&A with Frank Lantz

his emphasis on the pure construction of games as designed creative works is what Lantz hopes will distinguish NYU from other game design programmes, which often have a more specific focus on getting students professional-grade jobs after graduation. For example, the University Of Southern California has recently earned fame for its game design programme, which stems in part from the success of its most recognisable alumni, Kellee Santiago and Jenova Chen. Their thesis project, *Flow*, would launch development careers working alongside Sony. USC's game design programme, a subset of its Interactive Media Division, has been supported by endowments from both EA and Microsoft, and many of its graduates now work for established game companies.

"My question to the students was, 'What do you want to be?'" recounts **Joseph Olin**, who teaches a class at USC. He's a past president of the Academy Of Interactive Arts And Sciences, and the current executive director for the International Digital Media And Arts Association. "In game making, publishers want specific skills for people coming into even entry-level positions, and they tend to be really uninterested in your greater designs on being the next Tim Schafer. It's only your ability to promote your skills and talents within their systems that give rise to a successful career."

Olin uses a similar sort of game studio approach to his teaching, although he offers more of a business focus. "I tell my classes I'm doing the same thing I'm asking them to do," he says. "I'm working on a prototype I'm bringing to Microsoft, I'm pitching, I'm building paper prototypes, and if we don't think it's fun, we have a problem. It's better to find that out early, because coding is expensive, making art is expensive."

Jonathan Zabel was a classmate of Chen and Santiago at USC, and graduated as part of the first group to receive their bachelor's degree in game design in 2008. "USC definitely got me started," says Zabel, now a product manager at Breaktime Studios. "I started out as a producer, which was a common path for graduates. There are also a fair amount of artists and engineers, but the programme was really good at turning out producers.

"In Silicon Valley, there's been this merging of the producer and product manager. So much of the business has been driven by metrics, and there's no shortage of people who have a sharp mind for analytics. But just using metrics to determine whether a button should be red or blue only gets you so far. There needs to be some creative vision that you're driving toward."

One of the unique possibilities to emerge from bringing videogames on campus is the idea of game studies as a pure academic discipline. "One of the things that's unfortunate with film schools and literature programmes is that the divide between theory and practice is so wide," **Jesper Juul** says. Juul is a visiting professor at NYU's Game Center and the author of a number of influential books on videogame theory, including Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules And Fictional Worlds.

"There's a beauty in how game systems overlap with the rest of the world"

The NYU programme is built around a belief that the practice of game design cannot be separated from a study of its most mysterious philosophical qualities. Videogames themselves are objects that span Charles Percy Snow's infamous divide between hard science and the humanities, a schism he outlined in a 1959 lecture at Cambridge called The Two Cultures. "Games invented computers in a way," Lantz says. "Look at chess and the importance it had on the origins of computers, and the way games laid the foundation for logic machines. Games as a form of contemporary culture really speak to the present moment when we are so inundated with the digital and computers and networks."

While games present an example of merging science and art, they introduce new questions about how we relate to them. "We tend to think about games in terms of having fun, but fun is a terrible word, really, for describing what we do," Juul says. "If you look at people's faces when they're playing games, they're not just happy all the time. It's true they're having fun some of the time, but it's not the general experience. Fun is the wrong word for our engagement with games."

One of Juul's focuses for his classes next year will explore the paradox in the belief that we are having fun when the experiences we are playing through seem objectively unpleasant – a violent war game, for instance, or a frustratingly difficult reflex game. "There's an emerging idea of games as tragedy," Juul says. "You can compare it to tragic theatre, and ask why we would want to see something that sounds so terrible on paper, that invokes emotions that we tend to not enjoy.

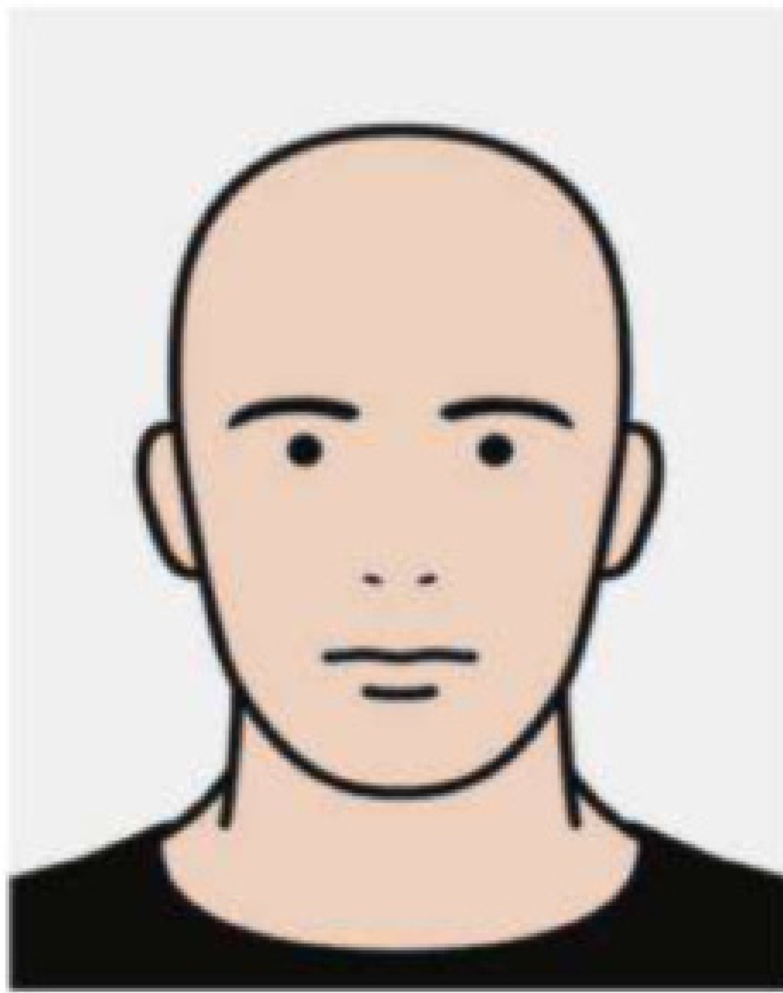
"In tragic games, you have this weird relationship where the player's really happy and the protagonist is unhappy. It's hard to not be happy when you've conquered a game and got to the end, but there's a weird kind of disconnect between the protagonist and the player then, which is why game tragedies are so hard to do."

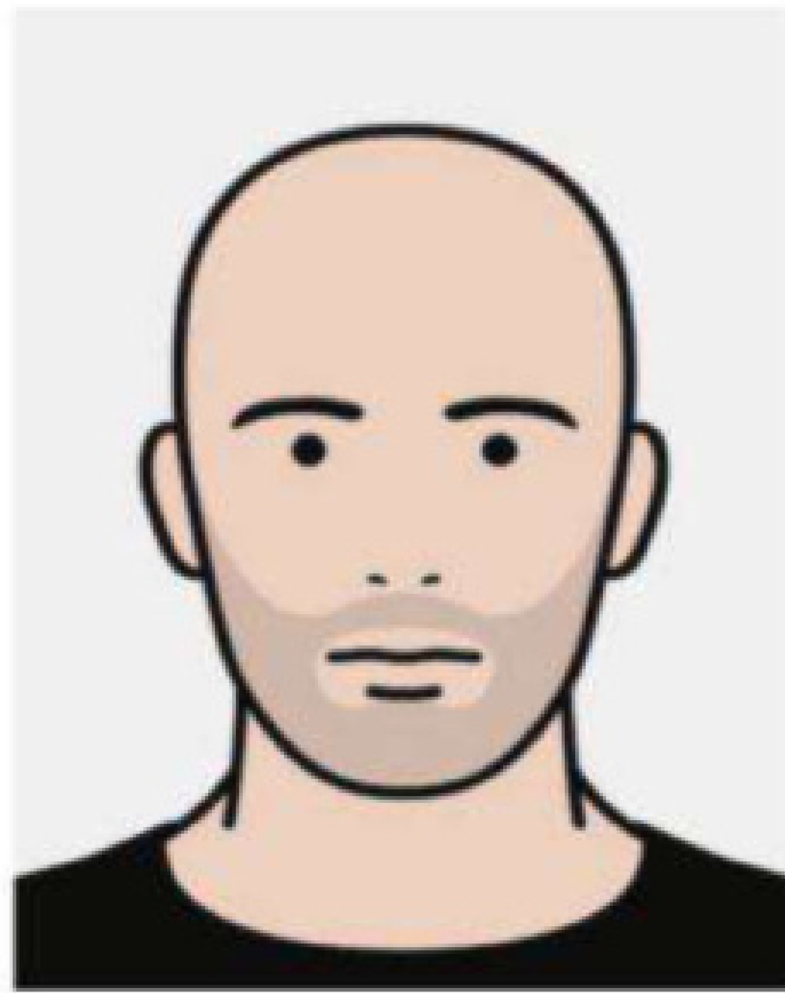
In confronting this seemingly contradictory phenomenon, of experiencing the tragic as pleasure, videogames can be seen as a modern extension of the classical pursuit of reason, the search for a purpose in the fact that seeming opposites can exist simultaneously. In the study of play, you can almost see the masks of comedy and tragedy from ancient Greece morphed into the laughter and conflict at the heart of the most popular commercial games today.

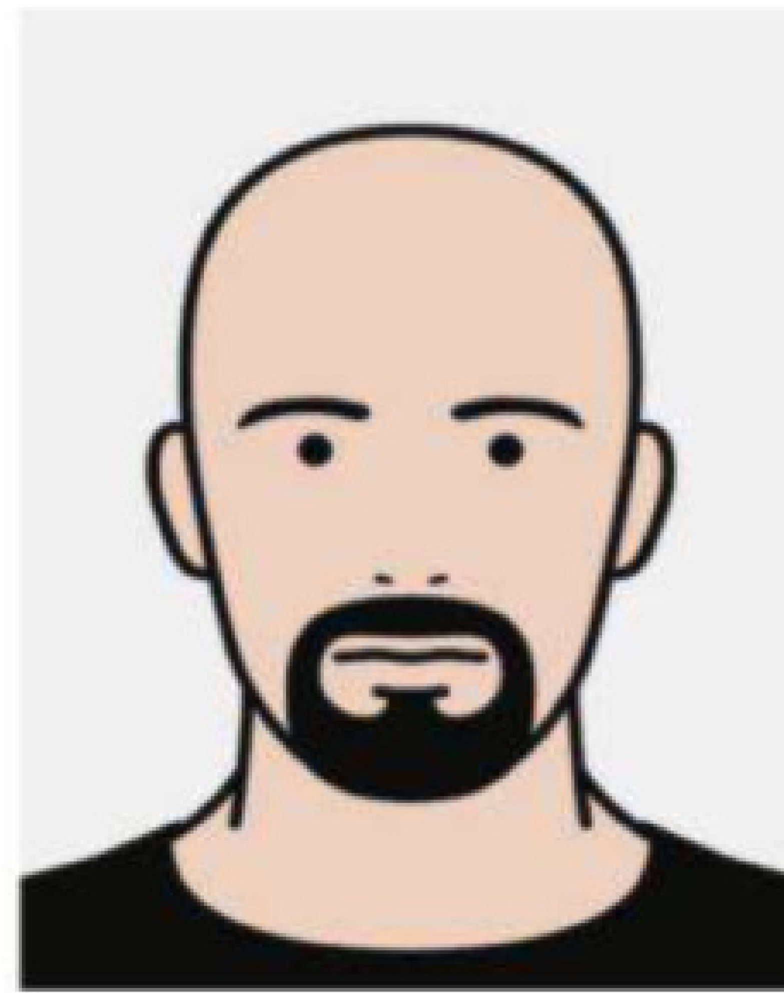
"Games are big. They're something people devote their whole lives to," Lantz said. "There's a beauty in seeing where their systems overlap with the rest of the world. They're a collection of rules and algorithms, and there's real beauty in realising how deep that can go and just free-diving in it. That's a big deal. You should take that seriously. That's our approach." ■

The Psychology Of...
Avatars

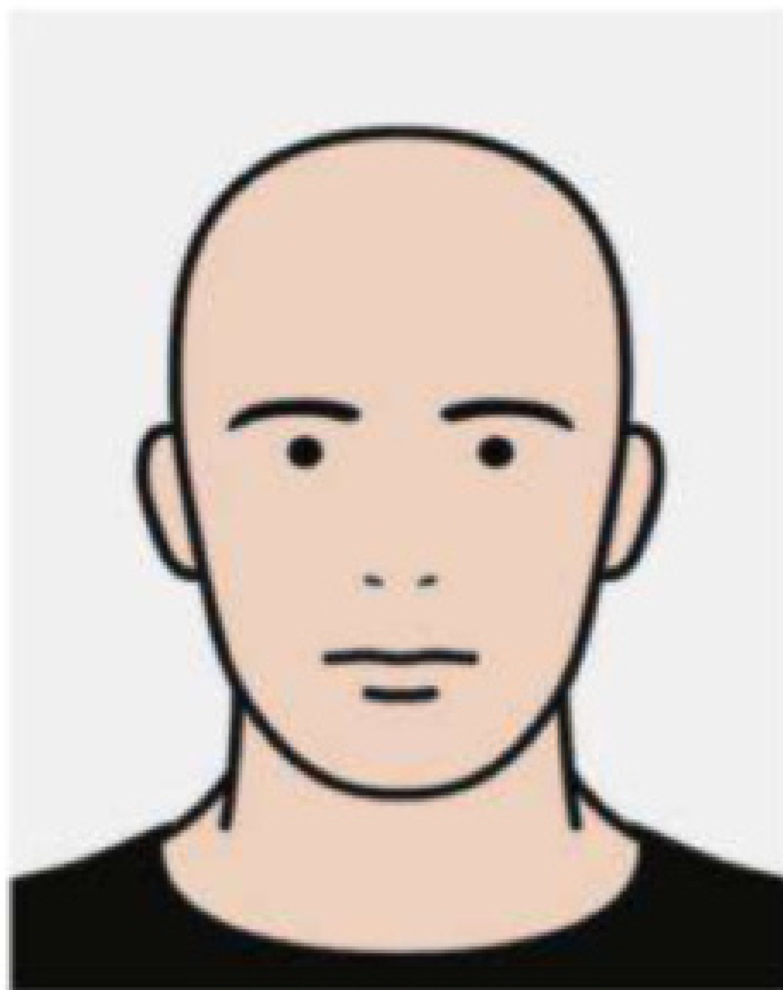
In part two of our series on the science behind games, we chart the blurry the line between player and avatar. Digital versions of us are not only altering the way that we perceive ourselves, but how others see us, and even how we go on to behave in the real world


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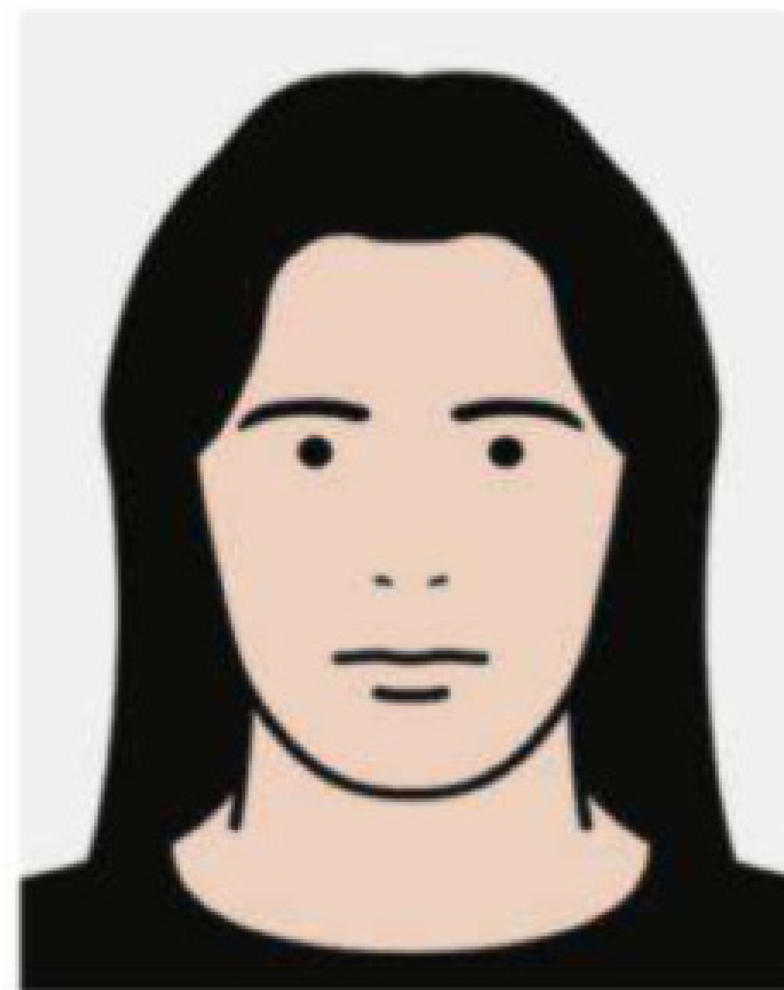

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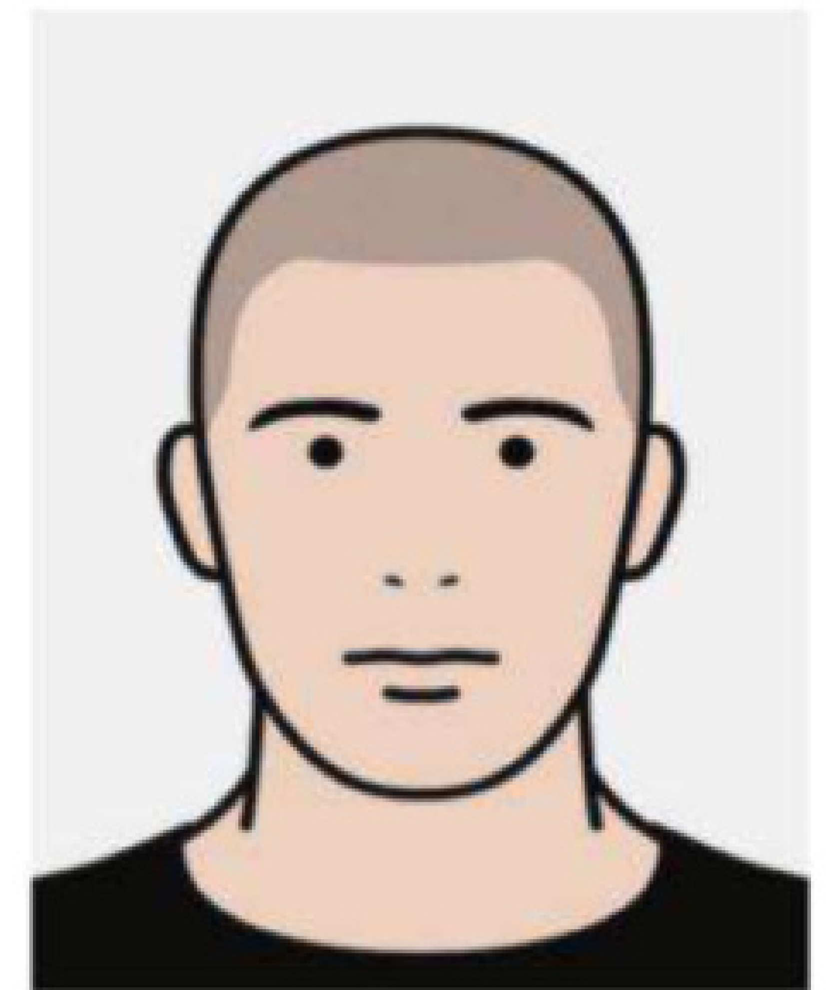

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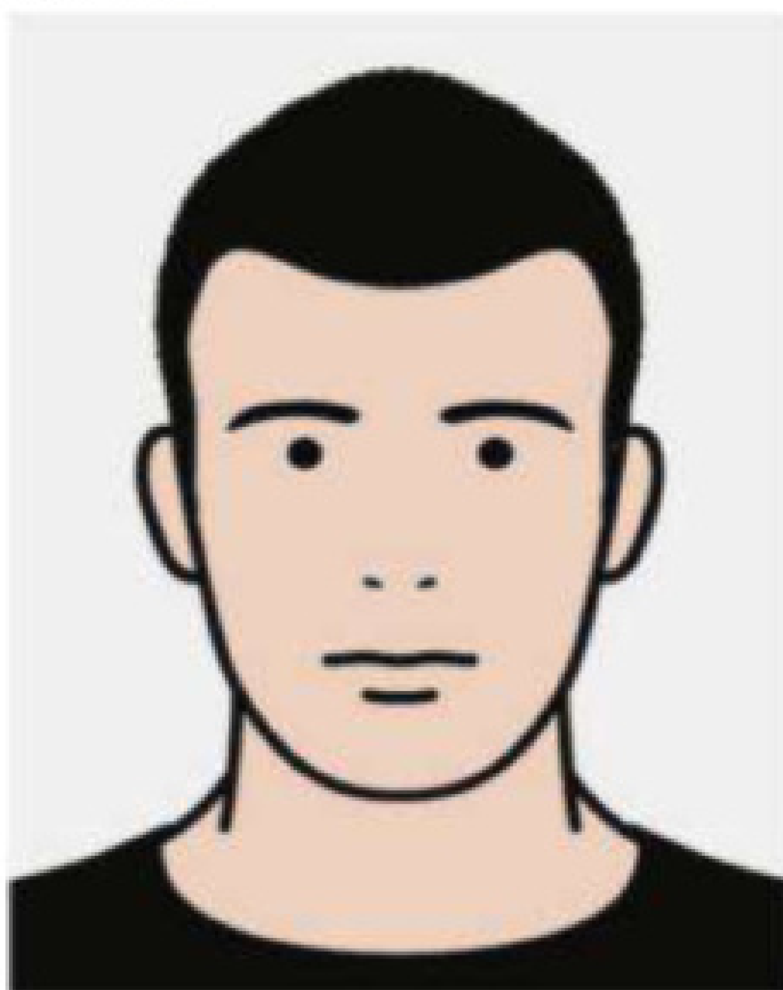

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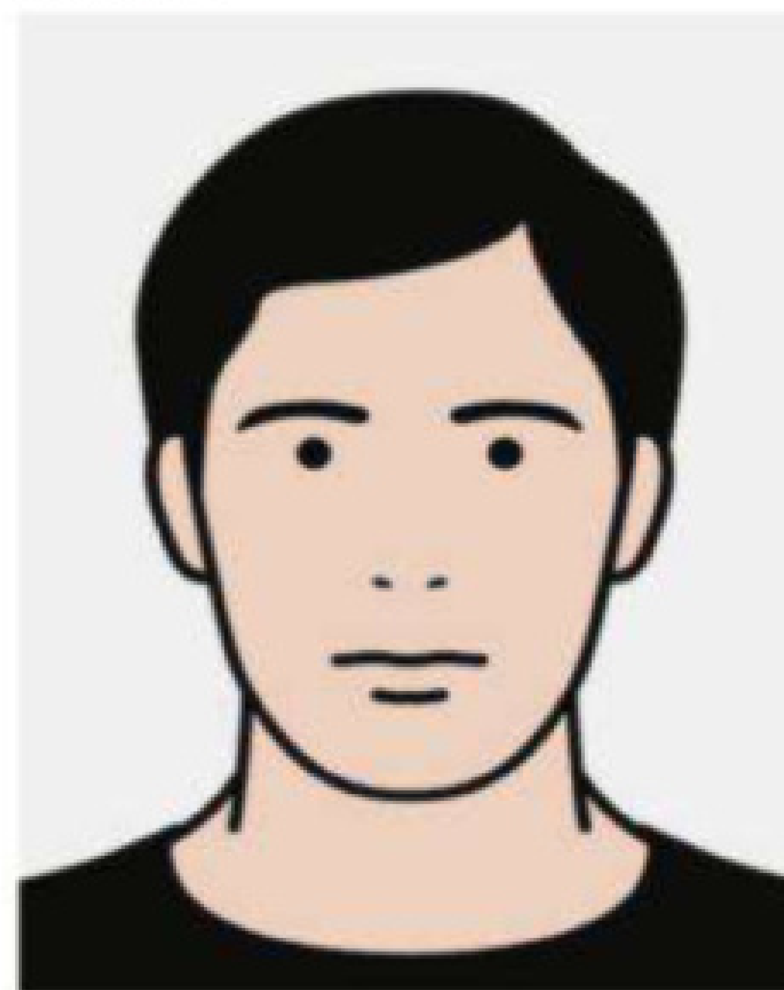

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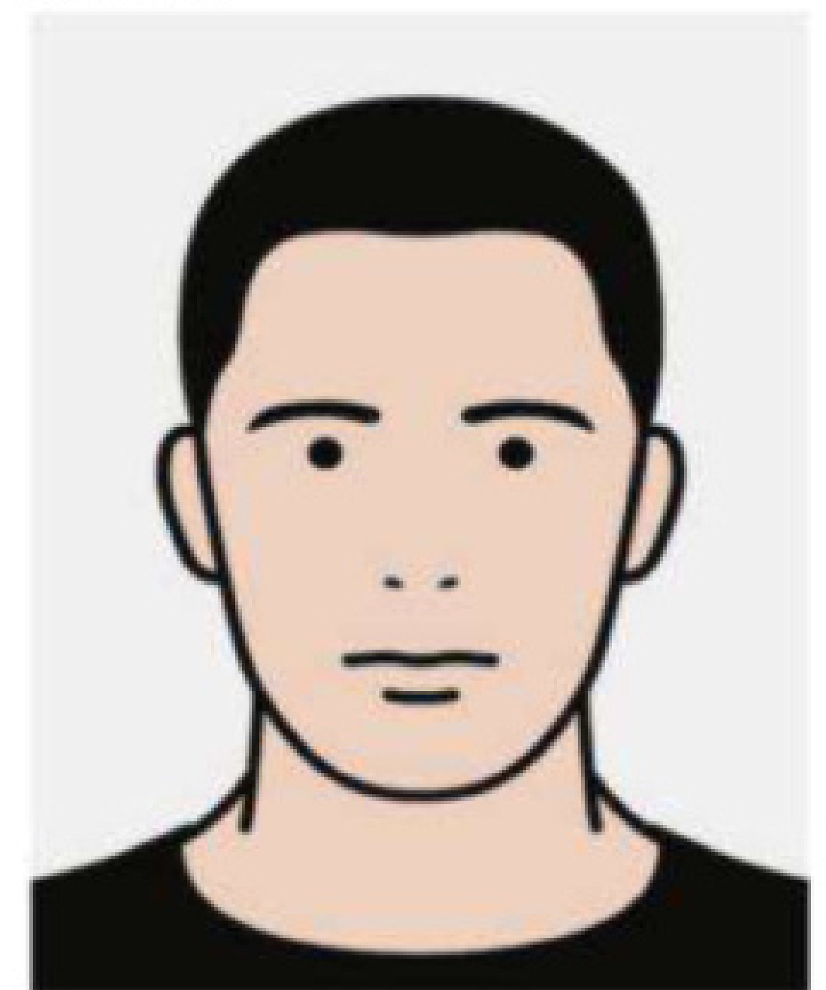

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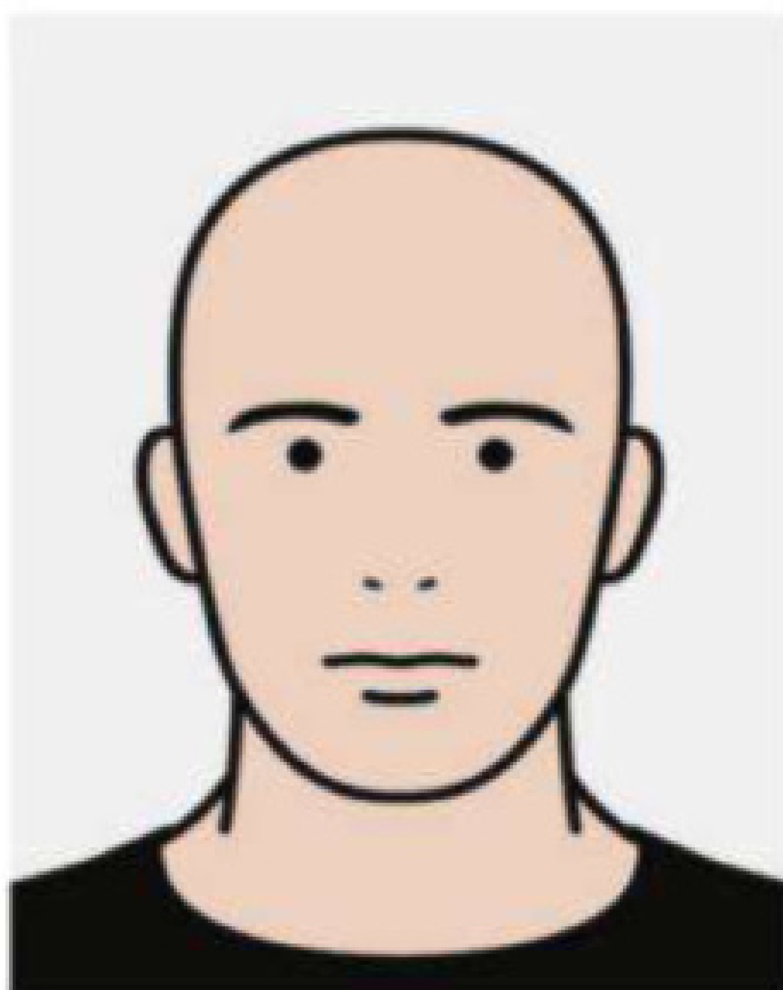

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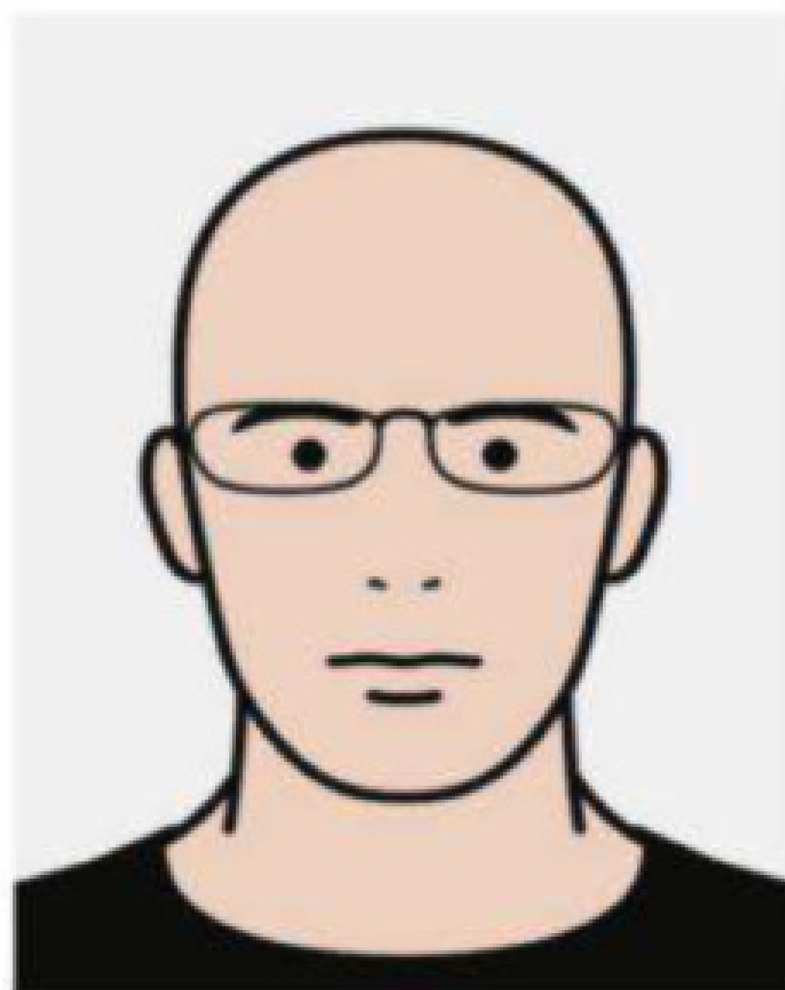

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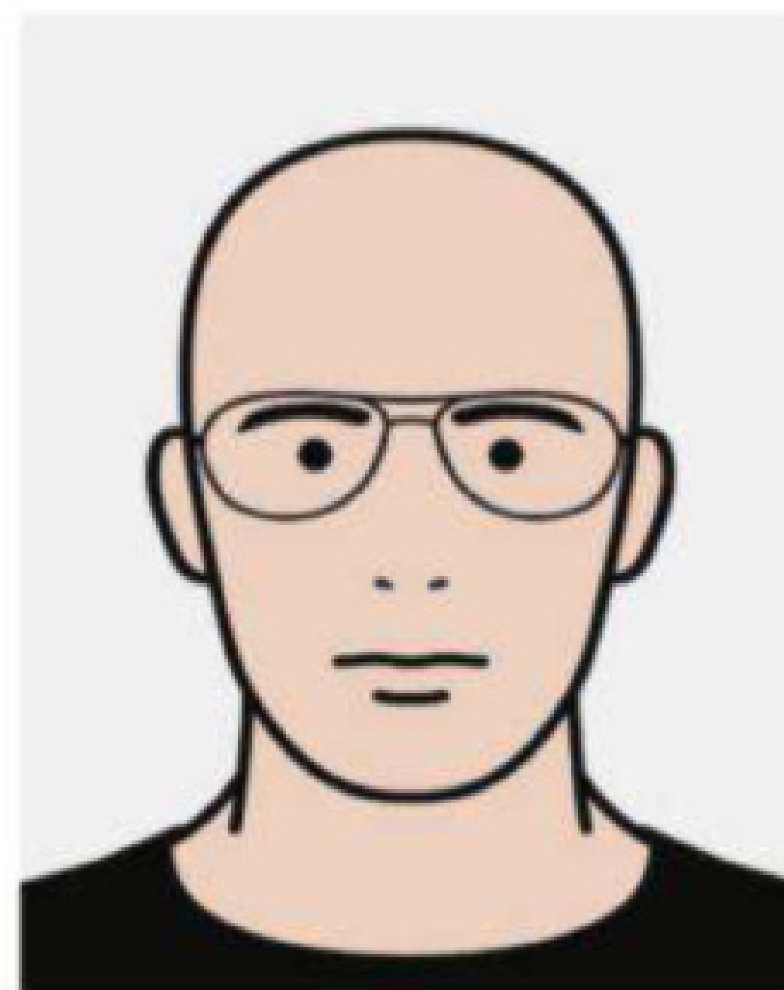

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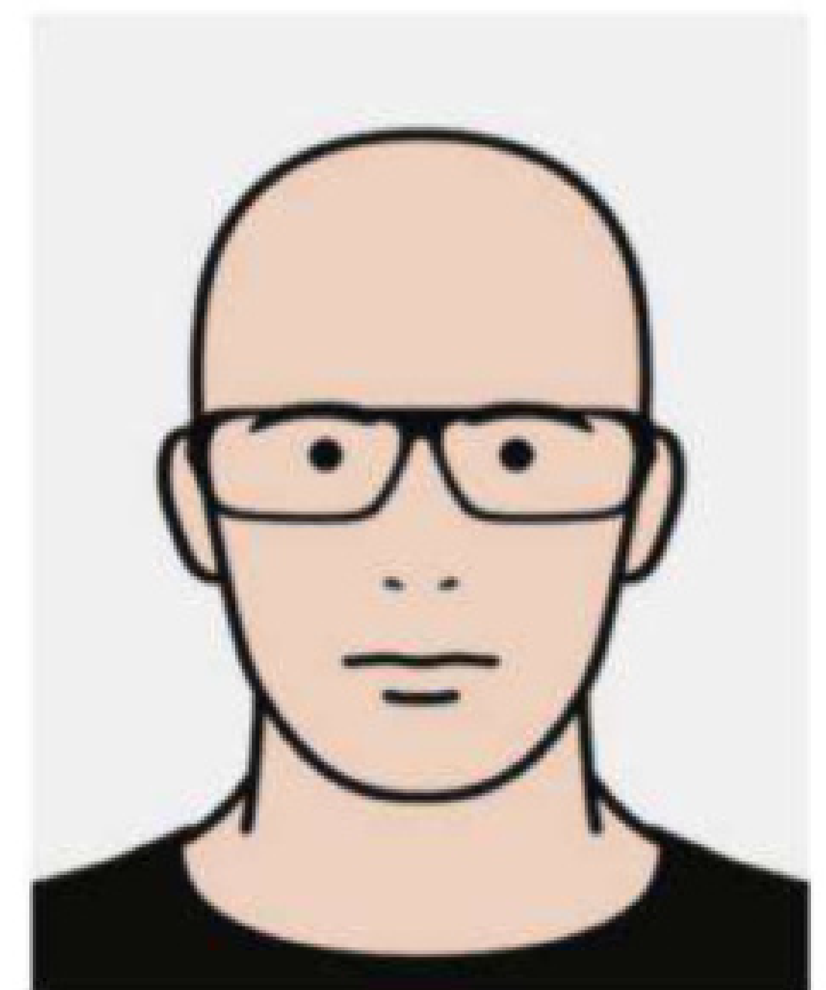

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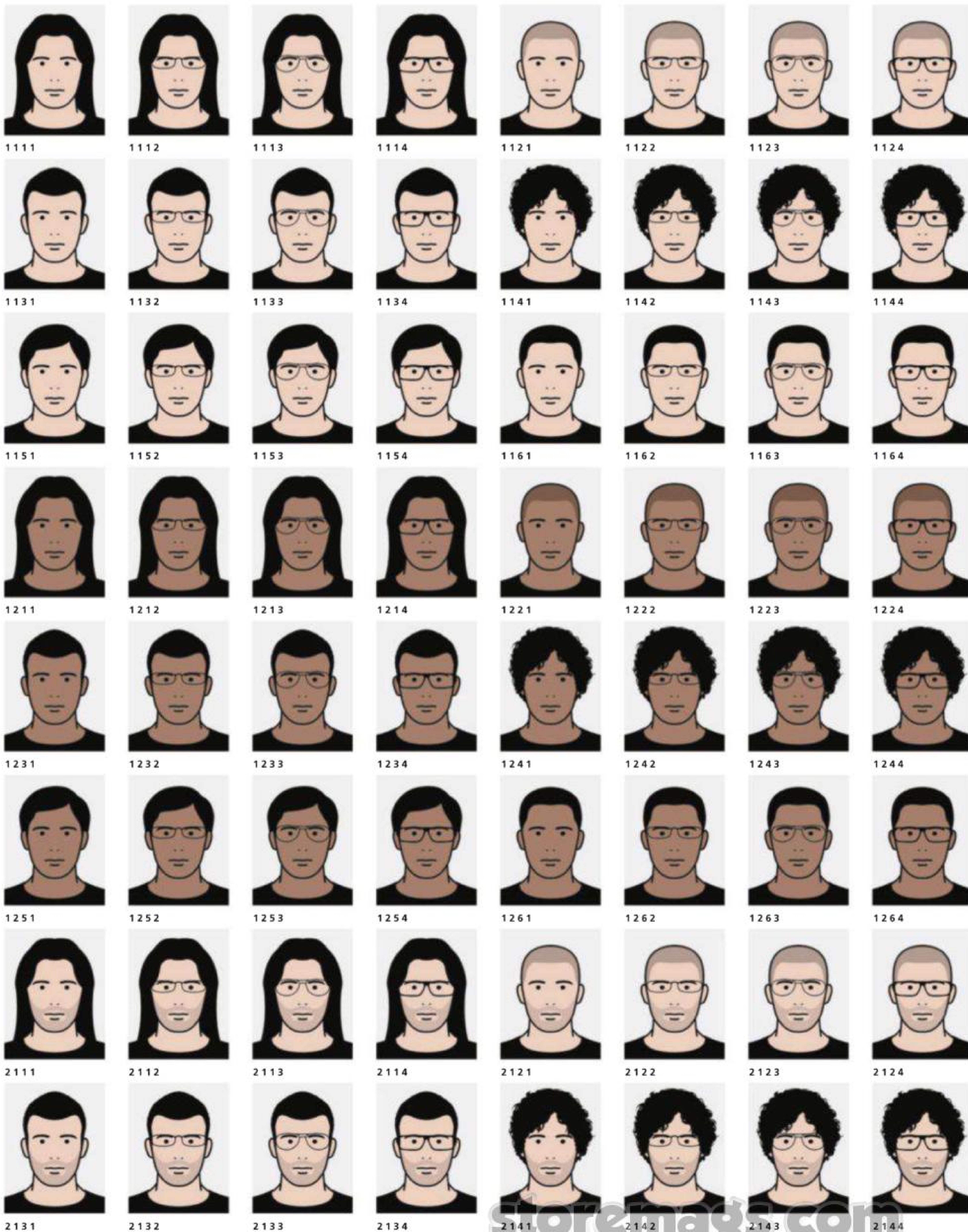

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Select chin, skin, hair and eye details to create a four-digit code (chin style is the first digit, skin second, etc), then find your avatar from the corresponding number in the grids on p90, 93 and 94



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ur appearance changes every day. When we get up each morning, we decide what clothes and jewellery to wear, which hairs to shave and which to style. All of this varies by occasion, and some of us make more radical alterations as well, such as getting tattoos, piercings or cosmetic surgery.

In real life, though, we're often limited in the changes we can make to appear taller, say, or more prosperous. Videogames and virtual realities, on the other hand, are more flexible. They can let us be a hulking brute, a sultry minx or a fleet-footed athlete. We might even choose to be a different species altogether. Or we can just be ourselves, but with flawless skin or huge pectoral muscles.

Researchers have been studying the reactions to our real appearance in others for a long time, but they've also started to seriously study the psychology of our avatars. At first

The ability to create idealised versions of ourselves is connected to how much we enjoy the game and how immersed we get

they used models of human behaviour relevant to appearances in real space, but have gradually built up new concepts to understand how people behave when they adopt different types of in-game form. It's a topic that interests academics in fields as diverse as psychology, political science, communications, sociology and marketing because of its ever-growing potential to impact lives. So why do we choose the avatars that we do? How do different avatars change our behavior in games? And how does the experience affect us when we select 'quit game' and re-enter the real world?

Explaining why we adopt some the avatars we do is easy: it's down to the demands of the game. We decide to look like an elf because we want to max out our mage build, for example. But what about virtual playgrounds where we have options that aren't constrained by the game's mechanics? An emerging line of research says that when the choice is ours, it's often about building a better version of ourselves.

"Studies have shown that, in general, people create slightly idealised avatars based on their actual selves," says **Nick Yee**, a research scientist at the Palo Alto Research Center. He should know: Yee has spent the past ten years studying the effects of avatars on human behavior in settings such as *Second Life* and *World Of Warcraft*. "But a compensation effect has been observed. People with a higher body mass index – likely overweight or obese – create more physically idealised avatars, [which are] taller or thinner. And people who are depressed or have low self-esteem create avatars with more idealised traits, [such as being] more gregarious and conscientious."

Other researchers have found that the ability to create idealised versions of ourselves is strongly connected to how much we enjoy the game, how immersed we become, and how much we identify with the avatar. Assistant professor Seung-A 'Annie' Jin, who works at Boston College's Communication Department, did a series of experiments with Nintendo Miis and *Wii Fit*. She found that players who were able to create a Mii that was approximately their ideal body shape generally felt more connected to that avatar and also felt more capable of changing their virtual self's behavior – a fancy way of saying that the game felt more interactive and immersive. This link was strongest, in fact, when there was a big discrepancy between participants' perceptions of their ideal and actual selves.

"I would definitely recommend that developers allow players to design and don whatever kinds of avatars they like," states **Jim Blascovich**, a professor of psychology at the University Of California in Santa Barbara, and co-author of the book Infinite Reality: Avatars, Eternal Life, New Worlds, And The Dawn Of The Virtual Revolution. Doing so tends to make the game more appealing and lets us connect more with our avatar and the world he or she inhabits. But what then? Once we've adopted an avatar, how does its appearance affect how we play games and interact with other players?

This research has its roots in what's called self-perception theory, a watershed concept in social psychology pioneered by physicist- ➋

turned-psychologist Daryl Bem in the 1960s. Essentially, the theory says that we observe ourselves and use that information to make inferences about our attitudes or moods, as opposed to assuming our attitudes affect our behaviours. For example, someone who hurls themselves out of an aeroplane with a parachute might think, 'I'm skydiving, so I'm the kind of person who seeks out thrills.'

In one clever study of this theory by Fritz Strack and his colleagues, subjects were given a ballpoint pen and told to hold it in their mouth in one of two ways. Some were asked to use pursed lips and others were told to hold it between their front teeth, with their lips drawn up and back. The former approach tricked the subjects into frowning, while the latter got them to smile. When asked to rate the amusement value of a cartoon, those who were

"In our studies at Stanford, we have demonstrated that avatars shape their owners... They alter the identity of those who use them"

being made to smile thought it was far funnier than those who were forced to frown. Their appearance was affecting their mood.

This kind of 'first behavior, then attitude' effect has been widely replicated in other studies. In one, researchers hooked male participants up to a monitor that beeped in time with their heart rates while they perused centrefolds from Playboy magazine. When the researchers used their control over the machine to fake an accelerated heartbeat, subjects decided that they must have a thing for the particular model they were viewing.

So first we perceive what we look like or what we're doing, and then we draw conclusions about our attitudes and identity. And it turns out that we may continue to act in line with that presumed identity. In fact, Yee started his career by taking the precepts of social identity theory and using them to understand how people behave depending on the virtual avatars they assume. In one of his earliest experiments, Yee had subjects don a head-mounted display that let them perceive and move around in a simple virtual environment. There was just a virtual room, another person controlled by someone else, and a virtual mirror. The mirror was important, because it obviously wasn't a real mirror and the researcher could use it to show whatever 'reflection' of the subjects' avatars he wanted. In fact, Yee randomly showed subjects one of three types of avatar reflection: ugly, normal and attractive.

What Yee was interested in was how this would affect how subjects interacted with the other person in the virtual room. After following directions to inspect their avatars in the mirror, subjects were asked to approach the room's other occupant and chat with him or her. This other person was controlled by a research assistant and followed a simple script to get the conversation going, saying something like: 'Tell me a bit about yourself.'

What the study revealed was that how attractive a subject's avatar appeared to be affected how they behaved. Relative to those with ugly avatars, people assigned attractive looks both stood closer to the other person and disclosed more personal details about themselves to this stranger. Then, in a follow-up study using the same setup, Yee found that people using taller avatars were more assertive and confident when they engaged in a simple negotiation exercise. So, generally speaking, people with prettier and taller avatars were more confident and outgoing than those with ugly and stumpy virtual representations. Like in the real world, we first make an observation about our avatar, infer something about our character, and then continue to act according to our perceived expectations. We needn't make a conscious decision to do it.

"Studies have shown that people unconsciously conform to the expectations of their avatar's appearances," says Yee when we contact him to talk about the piece of research we've just described. "We've termed this phenomenon the Proteus effect, after the Greek god who could change his physical form at will. These studies in virtual environments parallel older studies in psychology showing that people conform to uniforms given to them."

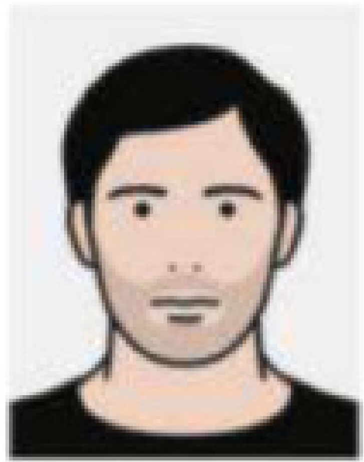
"In our studies at Stanford, we have demonstrated that avatars shape their owners," agrees **Jeremy Bailenson**, an associate professor and Infinite Reality's other author. "Avatars are not just ornaments – they alter the identity of the people who use them."

Gender rolls

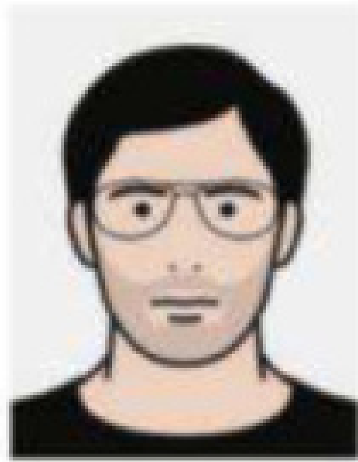
Playing on the other side of the gender divide can be fun, but a recent study of *Second Life* players found that 82 per cent of all players used avatars of the same gender as themselves. Among women, the figure leaps to 96 per cent, although research suggests at least a few women will choose male avatars to avoid unwanted attention in MMO games. This may explain why even when some female players play with female avatars, they choose nonhuman or ugly options. "I've seen a lot of anecdotes from women saying that female avatars get too much negative attention from male users," says researcher Nick Yee. "To avoid this attention, but to remain in a female body, some women choose less attractive female avatars."

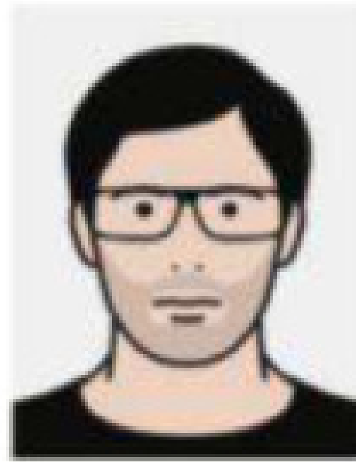


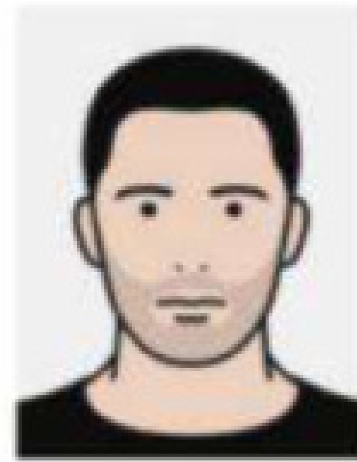
Nick Yee is a scientist at the Palo Alto Research Center. His work focuses on virtual worlds and online games


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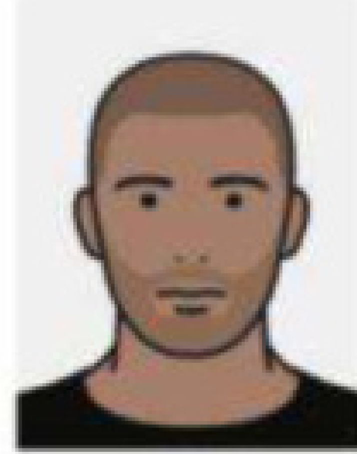

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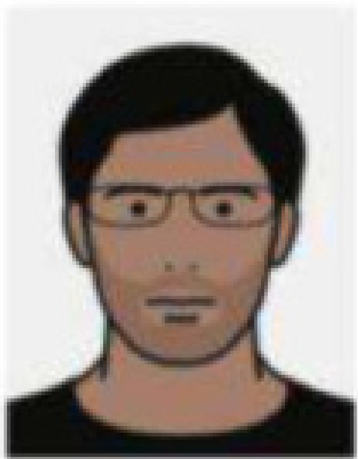

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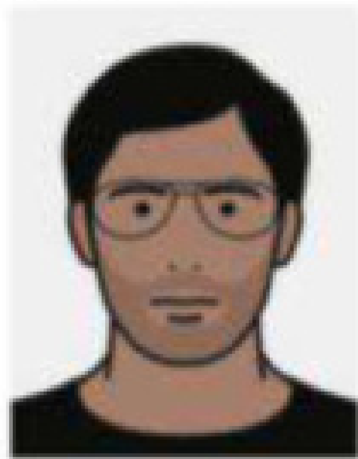

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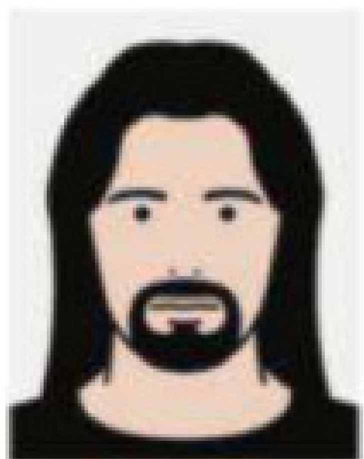

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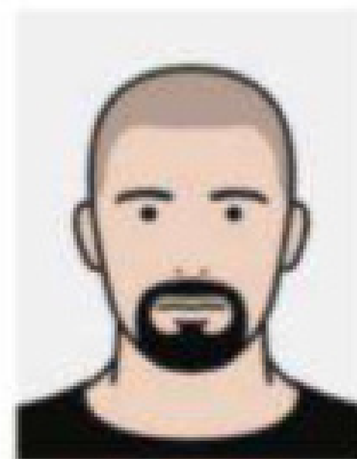

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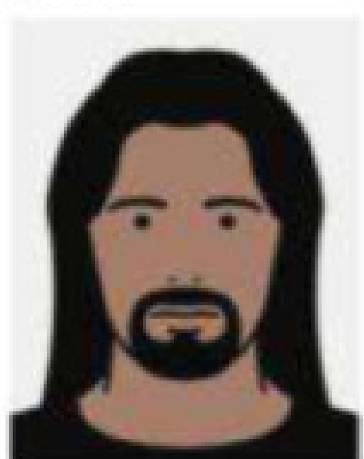

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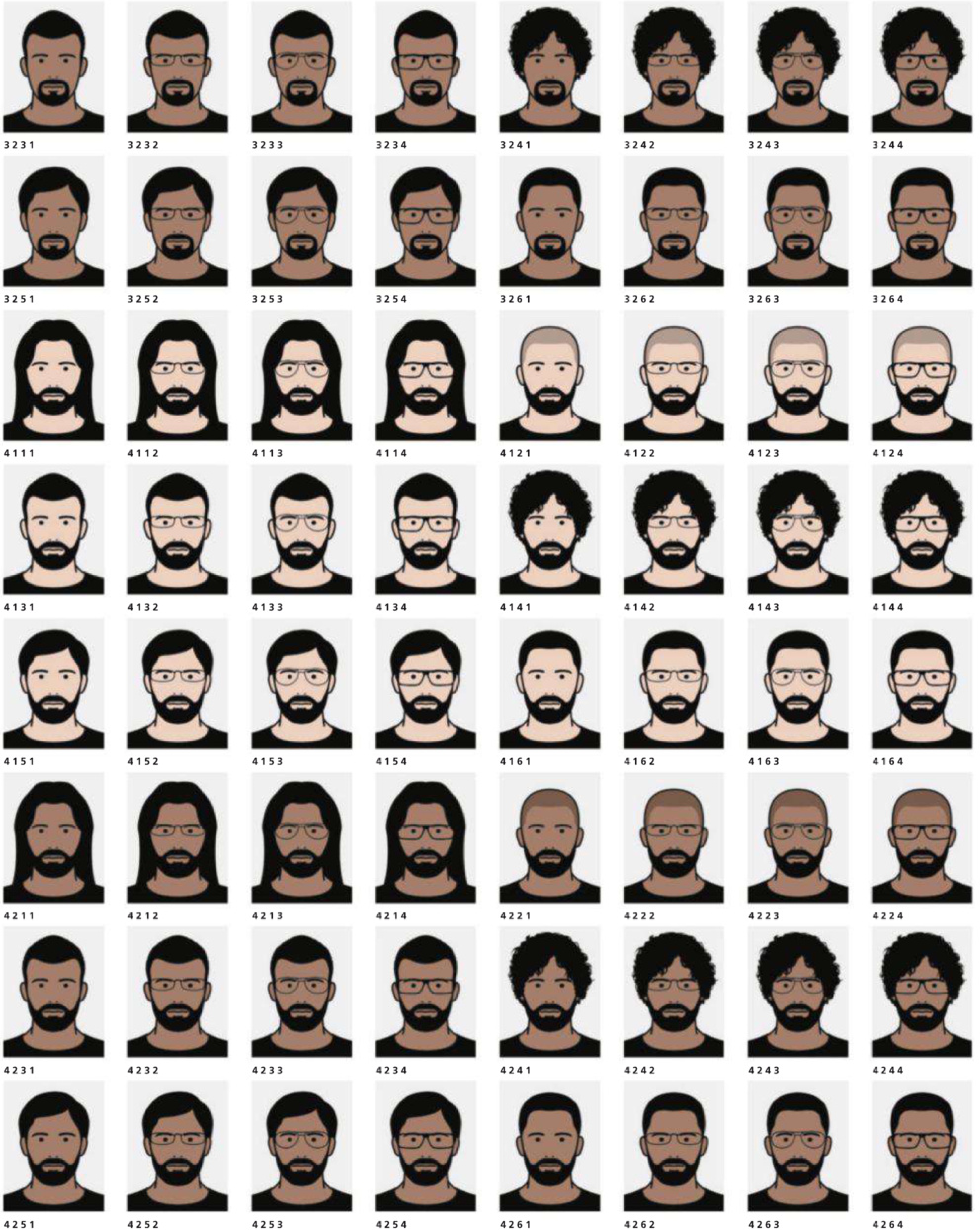

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In line with this theory, one study by **Christoph Kilmmt** and his colleagues at Hanover College found that after playing *Call Of Duty*, players were more likely to associate words such as 'me' or 'myself' with words like 'soldier' or 'pistol'. Meanwhile, those who played *Need For Speed* associated themselves more with words such as 'racing' or 'driver'.

The Proteus effect, then, describes the phenomenon where people will change their in-game behavior based on how they think others expect them to behave. The thing is, subsequent research by Yee, Bailenson and others has revealed that there doesn't even have to be an audience for us to feel the need to conform to our avatar's appearance – an assumed one is sufficient. So while the requirements of the game will probably marshal the strongest influence on behaviour – if we have to be aggressive, diplomatic or evasive to win, then we will be – the Proteus effect will also exert an influence on how we behave and how we treat others in a game.

Our avatars' power extends beyond the game, and unsurprisingly there's an angle to this that involves selling you stuff

But what about after we quit? Well, our avatars' power extends beyond the game, and perhaps unsurprisingly, there's an angle to this that involves selling you stuff. Imagine, for example, that you're in the Xbox dashboard and you notice that your avatar is holding up a branded soft drink and grinning. Do you think you'd be more likely to remember that brand and pick some up the next time you're at the shops? Research by Bailenson and his colleagues suggests you would. In their study, the team altered photos of people to show them holding up fictitious brands of fizzy drinks. Even though the participants knew the photo was doctored, they tended to express a preference for the fake brand, simply because they'd seen a representation of themselves holding it.

Other researchers have found similar results when they showed people pictures of themselves in a certain brand of clothing, and one study by Rachel Bailey, Kevin Wise and Paul Bolls at the University Of Missouri in Columbia looked at how kids reacted to advertisements for sweets and junk food that were thinly disguised as Web games. If the 'advergames' allowed players to customise their avatars, the kids remembered the snacks better and said that they enjoyed the game more.

It's not all parent-scaring news, though. For example, psychiatrists use mental visualisation as a technique for treating phobias and social disorders. Someone deathly afraid of swimming, for instance, might be coaxed into imagining themselves at a pool. Through this kind of repeated imaginary exposure, the person might eventually seize control of their phobia.

Along those same lines, a body of work around social learning theory has shown that we can be encouraged to adopt new and beneficial behaviours by watching others perform them. The more similar the other person is to us, the more likely it is to work. Today, the technology exists to take our likeness and show it exercising and eating vegetables instead of chugging soft drinks. In fact, some researchers are experimenting with such approaches. Jesse Fox and Bailenson at Stanford University recently published a paper in which they examined this exact possibility.

In the study, the researchers outfitted participants with a head-mounted display and set of controls that let them experience and navigate a simple virtual environment. Some people saw avatars with photorealistic images of their faces attached, while others saw no avatar, or an avatar with an unfamiliar face. Everyone was then told about the importance of physical activity, asked to practise some simple exercises, and invited to keep exercising for as long as they wanted. Through a series of experiments based on this setup, Fox and Bailenson found that when people saw avatars that looked like them mirroring the exercises they tended to work out for longer. The effect was even greater when they saw the avatar slim down in the process. When asked later, people who saw their face on happy avatars also reported hitting the gym after being dismissed.

So while you needn't have a panic attack the next time you see a character-creation screen full of choices, keep in mind that whatever you pick not only says something about you, but it can unconsciously affect how you behave on both sides of the screen as well. ■

Uniform behaviour

A 1988 study used archival data from American football and hockey games to prove that players are more likely to earn penalties for overly aggressive play when wearing black uniforms. The same players proved less likely to earn penalties when wearing lighter-colored uniforms. In a follow-up lab study, the researchers found that the assignment of a black or white uniform helped predict whether people would choose more aggressive games (a dart-gun duel, say) or less aggressive games (such as a golf putting contest) from a list of options.





James Blascovich (top), a professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University Of California, and Jeremy Bailenson, an associate professor at Stanford University

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Mario Kart 7 3DS
After numerous iterations on the theme of Nintendo's colourful cast driving around the Mushroom Kingdom, you'd expect the formula to be getting a little stale. But *Mario Kart 7* is a best-of that blasts off ahead of the portable racing pack with a perfect mixture of tracks old and new. The unlock ladder for new wheels and vehicles makes the joy of singleplayer even more inviting, but of course it's in the game's online and local multiplayer where the blue-shell-cursing magic happens.

Waking Mars iOS
Cultivation meets exploration in this charming ecosystem sim. Building up biomass throughout the Red Planet's caverns to progress on to pastures new is your aim, and it's a soothing yet engaging mix of seed sowing and reaping the rewards. The compulsion to get five stars in every cave soon takes root, and a self-propagating system is a joy to behold, setting this apart from the usual flora.

Mass Effect 3 360, PC, PS3
Two games' worth of choice feed into *Mass Effect 3*, making for a level of redundancy that must have made its scriptwriters wince. Play through with a different backstory and entire plot strands are different. Whole missions are recast. Few games feel as tailor made for the player, but there's no smoke and mirrors here, just vast amounts of work and writing making it so.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

How DIY features illustrate the level designer's craft

A good magician never reveals their tricks, which must make RedLynx the worst kind of conjurer. *Trials Evolution*'s (p106) track editor isn't just an astonishingly comprehensive design tool, although it does allow players to tweak everything in their amateur levels from the time of day to precise placement of an out-of-bounds box. It's also, when you decide to edit one of the studio's own creations, a complete drawing back of the curtain. In the track editor, the mechanics behind every clever connection between level furniture, the carefully chosen location of every trigger point, and the timing for each special effect are laid bare. It offers the deconstructive appeal of watching a 'making of' featurette, with the added bonus of allowing you to deconstruct it yourself.



Being handed the ability to craft levels of your own, as well as being offered the chance to see exactly how the studio made its own creations, is pretty sobering stuff. You'll develop a new appreciation for the meticulousness of a track designer's art, partly through marvelling at the studio's tracks, and partly through despairing at your own creaky attempts. There's no excuse for failure, because as with *Ridge Racer Unbounded* (p110), players have been handed the exact same tools as those used by the studio's designers – right down to the controller.

RedLynx doesn't give players complete control of experience. Bike handling, the very core of the experience, is kept under tight control, a reliable constant as you navigate user-created levels. But in equipping players with the same set of tools given to its designers, the studio is letting players appreciate its talents – and when you're playing the levels for real, they're far too easy to take granted.

Trials Evolution

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer RedLynx
Format 360
Release April 18

Trials Evolution's opening menu screen shows a gang of motocross bros striding towards the camera with Reservoir Dogs-style panache. Hands are balled into fists, as if they're spoiling for a fight. Or perhaps they spend so much time revving throttles, their fingers have begun to instinctively curl up just so. The whole scene looks oddly familiar. Photoshop futuristic weaponry into those hands, dim the lights and you've effectively recreated *Halo: Reach*'s box art.

The stoic rider leading the charge doesn't have an official name, but he's the closest thing the *Trials* franchise has to a mascot. With his face enigmatically concealed behind a visor, you can almost imagine him being a Spartan in casual dress. One of the background dudes has a skeleton maw printed on the bandana cloaking his mouth, like Emile-A239's skull-decorated helmet. The two images even share a backdrop of mountain peaks, conveying both grandeur and struggle.

The fundamental difference between these two images is that one of them is hand-over-its-heart earnest, and the other is busy setting up newcomers for one of the most delightful punchlines gaming has to offer. *Reach* herniates a spinal disc from standing at such rigid attention, pouring on its tale of military heroism and sacrifice like a jet of maple syrup from a fire hose. But those flexing *Trials* badasses? They're about to get so thoroughly crushed, burned, mangled, broken, pummelled and exploded that all the Mjolnir-powered armour in the universe couldn't save them.

Trials Evolution builds on the sadistic charms of its predecessor, *Trials HD* – one of XBLA's all-time top-sellers – in precisely the same way *Dark Souls* built on the template of *Demon's Souls*: preserve the beating heart of the gameplay experience and channel your energy into developing a more robust world in which that interaction can play out. In FromSoftware's case, that core was a patient, deliberate combat rhythm. For *Trials*, it's all about the wild-stallion-breaking task of subduing that bike, which bucks and heaves beneath novice thumbs, only to gradually steady and do its master's bidding as your skills improve.

The *Trials* bike physics model is a many-faceted, exquisitely polished diamond, but in the case of *Trials HD*, RedLynx was forced to mount it in a Burger King paper crown. Circumventing the limitations of *HD*'s graphics engine meant staging the game's outlandish obstacle courses in dingy warehouse interiors. Such depressing environs were hardly inviting, even if it was fun to imagine them as the brooding sibling of Aperture Science's gleaming test chambers, both constructed by a diabolical architect intent on blurring the line between testing and torture. *Evolution* transplants *HD*'s diamond to a lavish crown capable of showcasing its brilliance.

In moving *Evolution* outside of the warehouse and into a spacious natural world (with 500m draw distances), RedLynx addresses one of the primary criticisms levelled at *HD*, which concerned the game's precipitous difficulty curve. Many players simply hit a wall midway through the game and were unable to progress any further. They'd come up against a ramp that seemed as sheer as a cliff face, and would hurl the controller away after attempting to scale it a couple of dozen times, only to slide back down on each attempt.

It's all about the wild-stallion-breaking task of subduing the bike, which bucks and heaves beneath novice thumbs



***Evolution* doesn't assuage** these gripes by softening the difficulty, but uses creative measures to dab salve on the psychic wound that will inevitably form once you smash into its more ornery challenges. Scenic vistas lighten your mood and eliminate the claustrophobia that made *HD*'s atmosphere feel so stiflingly bleak at times. When you're attempting to clear a particular checkpoint on an advanced level for the 114th time, a gulp of fresh air – even the virtual sort – can mean the difference between giving up and steeling your nerves for one more try.

By sprinkling the gulfs between platforms with crates of dynamite and nuclear warheads, *HD* sought to defuse the sting of failure with slapstick laughs. It was difficult to hold a grudge against the game while watching a crate of explosives send your ragdoll rider spin cartwheels through the air like a clown being shot from a circus cannon.

Evolution takes this kind of slapstick absurdity and pushes the faders all the way up. Miss a jump and you'll trigger a land mine, or perhaps a bundle of C-4 explosive duct-taped to the side of a crate. The word 'Crash' flashes over your rider in cartoonish yellow text, like the 'Kapow! or 'Wham!' accompanying a Batman right hook. After crossing a track's finish line, *Evolution* regularly treats you to a short vignette in which your rider is savaged in hilariously macabre fashion. After the first track, a few squirrel toys rain down on his head, followed by a piano, followed by a massive freight train car. In one harbourside track, a submarine periscope peeks out of the water, spots your rider, then releases several depth charges that blast him into the sky.

Though the variety of environmental death-dealing in *Evolution* may come as a surprise, the frequency of dying shouldn't. Any sufficiently complex system is going to be difficult to master, and *Trials* is simply the most sophisticated and demanding platformer in existence, making even *Mario* games seem fluffy as marshmallows by comparison.

Because *Evolution* involves a motorcycle and finish times, it's easy to file it under 'racing game', but don't be fooled – this is a platformer at heart. We've come to equate the genre with the physical act of a character running and jumping, but RedLynx's motorcycle just interacts with ramps and platforms in a more engaging manner. When you're landing on feet, you either stick



Evolution keeps progression fatigue at bay in a variety of creative ways, not just by altering the theme of each track, but also its colour palette, as seen in Ridinghood's B-movie horror homage



ABOVE The track Trials Of Limbo takes Playdead's monochromatic art style and inverts its moodiness by having you gun your motocross bike across its bleak terrain. The spider, gears and hotel sign all make an appearance





ABOVE There are 20 collectible squirrels hidden throughout the game that you unlock in various ways. When you get the one in the Archipelago track, he tags along on your fender until your next fault. LEFT One of the extreme difficulty tracks, Dark City Run creates a noir-ish Frank Miller cityscape. The beginning of the level greets you with this painfully steep incline

Jumping into *Evolution*'s track editor with zero experience, it took us about 20 minutes to build this opening gauntlet. Simply use the D-pad to select obstacles or scenery, rotate them, then place with the A button

the jump or you don't, but a rear-drive motorcycle requires careful attention to balance and pitch.

Evolution's tracks burst at the seams with references to other games and broader touchstones of popular geek culture. Trials Of Limbo sees the silhouette of your rider biking through Playdead's dreamy monochromatic landscape. Titan Graveyard pays homage to Team Ico, featuring massive stone hands jutting from the ground, windmills, and hanging cages like the one that held *Ico*'s Yorda hostage. Lab Rat references *Portal*. Dark City Run is modelled after Sin City's noir-ish tricolour palette.

The only aspect of *Evolution* that doesn't improve on its sublime predecessor is its generally lacklustre skill games. Freestyler finds your rider trading his bike for skis and slaloming along a dirt track, accruing points for distance and additional bonuses for performing flips. It feels like a rehash of Flip Hunter from *HD*, only far more rigid and stiff without the springy bike physics in play. S.P.H.E.R.E. shows you can make a *Marble Madness*-type game in *Evolutions*'s editor, only one that's not as fun as the original. Exploding Man shows you can pay homage to *'Splosion Man*, but again, it's a pale imitation of the original. By using the skill games as a showcase for what it's possible to make, as opposed to what's most fun, the game momentarily loses sight of its first responsibility to players.



EXCITE BIKES

Up to four players can race side by side across Supercross tracks in either local or online play. These tracks employ simpler architecture, which is easier to parse from a zoomed-out perspective, but they're anything but boring. The *Trials* fundamentals of landing jumps carefully to preserve momentum will be the difference between winning and losing. Sloppy, unfocused play will result in you getting nudged off the rear of the screen, forcing a respawn at the next checkpoint and a fault to punish the error. You can even enable a crowd-pleasing option that lets players bail across the finish line to slip by opponents at the final second.

Beyond the singleplayer campaign, *Evolution* unleashes the deepest online experience in XBLA history. In addition to side-by-side Supercross (local or online with up to four players), playing over Xbox Live lets you go head to head on standard tracks against a friend in a private match, or against a stranger via matchmaking. Instead of the scrolling triangular marker from *HD*, *Evolution* drops a ghost – represented by a yellow dot – in the field of play that swoops along the track to represent either your live opponent or a legacy ghost you've selected from the overall leaderboard to test your skills against. It's a seismic improvement over the linear scrolling markers of *HD*, adding a far more dynamic awareness of your rival's progression.

But *Evolution* isn't solely concerned with cremating the competition, and the muscular Track Editor lets you create as well. Just pick any point on its vast open map, drop a starting and finishing marker, and begin placing obstacles. It's the same editor the designers at RedLynx used to make the game, which seems hard to believe until you realise you can load up the actual in-game levels to admire their painstaking handiwork, or even take them apart to see how they tick.

Despite the ease with which you can pull a rudimentary track together, with the bar being set so high, it's easy to grow impatient with your inferior skills. Fortunately, there are people in the community who know what they're doing and the Track Central will provide a steady stream of new, free content for the insatiable *Trials* fan. The ambitious, exacting craftsmanship of *Evolution* goes a long way to ensuring that every person who gives the game a proper chance will be seduced into becoming precisely such a fan.

Who knows, maybe those dudes on the *Evolution* menu screen are simply the avatars of a handful of RedLynx developers. They're not itching to punch anything, just hoping for a congratulatory fist bump. Well, gentlemen, here you go.

9

Post Script

Interview: Antti Ilvessuo, creative director, Trials Evolution

After 18 months in development, *Trials Evolution* is finally ready to hit XBLA. We talk to the game's creative director, **Antti Ilvessuo**, about how RedLynx balanced the game's difficulty in light of *Trials HD*'s reputation for being tough as nails, how it achieved such thematic diversity, and if it regrets settling for a dude in a racing helmet as a mascot.



Because fans have been honing their skills since the release of *Trials HD*, did you feel any need to boost the difficulty for *Evolution*?
I think for people who want to go for the ultimate hardest tracks, they'll be able to find user-generated tasks to challenge them. But we mainly wanted to keep the difficulty the same, because there are still a lot of people who can't pass the extreme tracks. So we didn't want to overshoot the difficulty. It would've been easy to make more difficult tracks, but then people wouldn't have liked it so much.

Each of the tracks has its own theme – horror, baseball, film noir, and so on. During development, were you conscious of trying to keep that diversity?
One important thing is that we didn't just all sit down in one room at the start of the project and say, "OK, what are the tracks?" We gave the designers a lot of freedom in what kind of tracks they wanted to create. I think that's a key reason why the tracks are so different. We didn't shoot down ideas. But even though there'll be one person in charge of a certain track design, each track will be touched by at least four designers.

"We gave the designers lots of freedom in what kind of tracks they wanted to create. We didn't shoot down ideas"



Are easier difficulty tracks also easier to design, or are they more challenging, because it takes more creativity to keep them interesting?
It'd be simple to make an easy track that's not good, but you have to think about what the shortcuts are, how you keep the flow and how you balance difficulty. When looking back, I think every track takes about the same time to develop. Obviously, the tracks that have more stuff happening in the background will take more time, but I don't think difficulty's much of a factor.

You had thousands of leaderboard replays banked in *Trials HD*. Did seeing how players approached the tracks affect your approach to designing *Evolution*?
One of our track designers was the number one *HD* player in the world when there were 400,000 players on the leaderboard. And two of our programmers, for example, could be as good as he is, but they didn't have as much time to play. So there's a lot of experience within the team, and that helps with our understanding of how the bike behaves in relation to various obstacles. In *Trials*, it's not all about whether or not players can simply pass a track, but designing tracks so players can get a faster time if they figure out just the right path.

One big change from *HD* is that in *Evolution* there isn't a single de facto best bike. You're forced to choose between raw power and finesse.
We have two good bikes now for getting the best times. If you want really good times, you can use the trials bike, but if you're really expert, you can use the motocross bike and just try to keep the flow of the track. There's a unique challenge in trying to keep that flow going.

You've given campaign events branding this time – Cutting Edge, Terminal Velocity – instead of naming them according to difficulty tier. Why the change?
In *Trials HD*, you'd unlock hard or extreme levels, but I think it's much more rewarding in *Evolution* that you unlock events that generally have harder levels. It's kind of a psychological thing, but it feels more rewarding that instead of just unlocking medium difficulty, you've unlocked two medium events, and generally inside those events, the difficulty becomes gradually harder.

You pay tribute to other game studios with various *Evolution* tracks. Did you let Playdead know ahead of time that you were planning a *Limbo* track?
Yeah, we sent Playdead images of the track and Dino Patti, who we know personally, said it looked cool. There's also a *'Splosion Man* skill game that we slipped in because we're friends with the Twisted Pixel guys.

Speaking of *Limbo* and *'Splosion Man*, those games have unique mascots. Was it a missed opportunity to use a generic motocross rider as *Trials'* mascot?
There hasn't been a lot of discussion about this inside the studio, but I know what you mean. One thing I'll say is that if you look at the *Trials* rider, his face is never shown fully, so he has this kind of superhero quality. You might see his mouth or his eyes, but never his full face. In that way, you can kind of think that you are the rider, because his face is never fully shown in any image. He's a nameless dude, but even when you customise your rider's gear in *Evolution*, you never see his face. People may not notice it, but that's the key there.

Even though the rider mascot doesn't give any indication of *Evolution*'s sense of humour, the squirrels tucked away in the game certainly do.
Squirrels are just kind of a fun thing to collect. People have asked why there are squirrels in the game, and I'd just say, "Why not?" *Trials* is a videogame, so there's lots of fun stuff happening. ■

Ridge Racer Unbounded

Namco Bandai's decision to entrust the licence of its chic arcade title *Ridge Racer* to *FlatOut* creator Bugbear showed remarkable confidence. Turns out it bet on the right studio. Joonas Laakso and his team have gripped *Ridge Racer* by the scruff of the neck and whipped the game into action-racing relevancy.

This is *Ridge Racer* inverted. No longer about endless, forgiving drifts, *Unbounded* is all about controlling chaos. Build your power meter to bursting, then unload it by slicing through scenery, smashing track-specific walls and obstructions to rack up points. Conversely, you can use it simply as a speed boost, or a means of taking down rivals. Any given session throws up shades of *Split Second: Velocity*'s explosive set-pieces, as well as *Burnout*'s slow-motion car crumpling and, of course, visual reflections of classic *Ridge Racer*'s showroom shimmer, but there's never any doubt that this is Bugbear's own opus.

The singleplayer takes place across Shatter Bay – a spot weld of top-tier American cities from New York to San Francisco, which *Unbounded* carves into playable districts. You unlock new challenges by accumulating points across various events. Domination races are most prevalent, the objective being to smash, crash and collide your way to the finish. Collateral damage impacts campaign progress as much as coming in first so prepare to balance your commitment to carnage with your focus on the finish. Tracks need to be memorised not only for their layout, but also their destructible elements. To know the hierarchy of *Unbounded*'s carefully arranged scenery is to master the game and to be able to outwit its fierce AI drivers. Initially, it's incomprehensible: some walls crumble to dust, while others stop you dead in your tracks. But once you've deciphered the plethora of assets, the sense of empowerment and achievement is up there with the genre's best, and accompanied by the thunderous beating of your pulse.

Domination mode is the singleplayer's bread and butter, but the game's other trials deliver equal doses of metal-twisting madness. Time Attacks give Bugbear an excuse to carry over its car-flipping ramp fetish from *FlatOut*, Frag Attacks are takedown challenges, while Drift Attacks are all about drawing perfect crescents with your tyres. *Unbounded* offers a carefully considered mixture of modes that never feels cheap or disposable, each making use of the game's weighty physics and the team's rock-solid proprietary tech.

Bugbear has been playing around with physics and destructible environments for years, but here it's struck the perfect balance between realism and exaggeration. Destroyable objects react to your bumper as you'd expect, yet don't fatally slow you down. Civilian traffic never thwarts your advantage, flipping out of your way and often smashing into the windscreen of your rivals.

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Bugbear Entertainment
Format 360 (tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now (EU), TBC (US)

This is the game Bugbear has been working towards for the past decade, delivered with pedal-flooring confidence



THE HOLLYWOOD LOOK
Throughout *Unbounded*'s meaty campaign, there's a real feeling of progression to your journey through the streets, thanks to great geographic variety that takes in docks, midtown madness and some sprawling highways. Producer **Joonas Laakso** explains how a distinct visual flavour helps define each portion of Shatter Bay's puzzle: "We have two lighting settings per district, used there and nowhere else. We wanted to give players a sense of advancing through the game, and to ensure the districts felt alive visually. Lighting was the obvious way to do that."

It helps that the framerate is so smooth, never stuttering despite the constant presence of debris.

Tracks may be littered with the remains of the fray, but the HUD and visual motifs remain clean, concise and stylish. Lap information and timings are frequently projected onto the scenery to save you the precious, game-changing milliseconds a glance at the top of the screen might cost you. *Ridge Racer*'s iconic streaking tail lights (present only during boosts) tell you where and when to drift, highlighting shortcuts when you're at full cement-ploughing power.

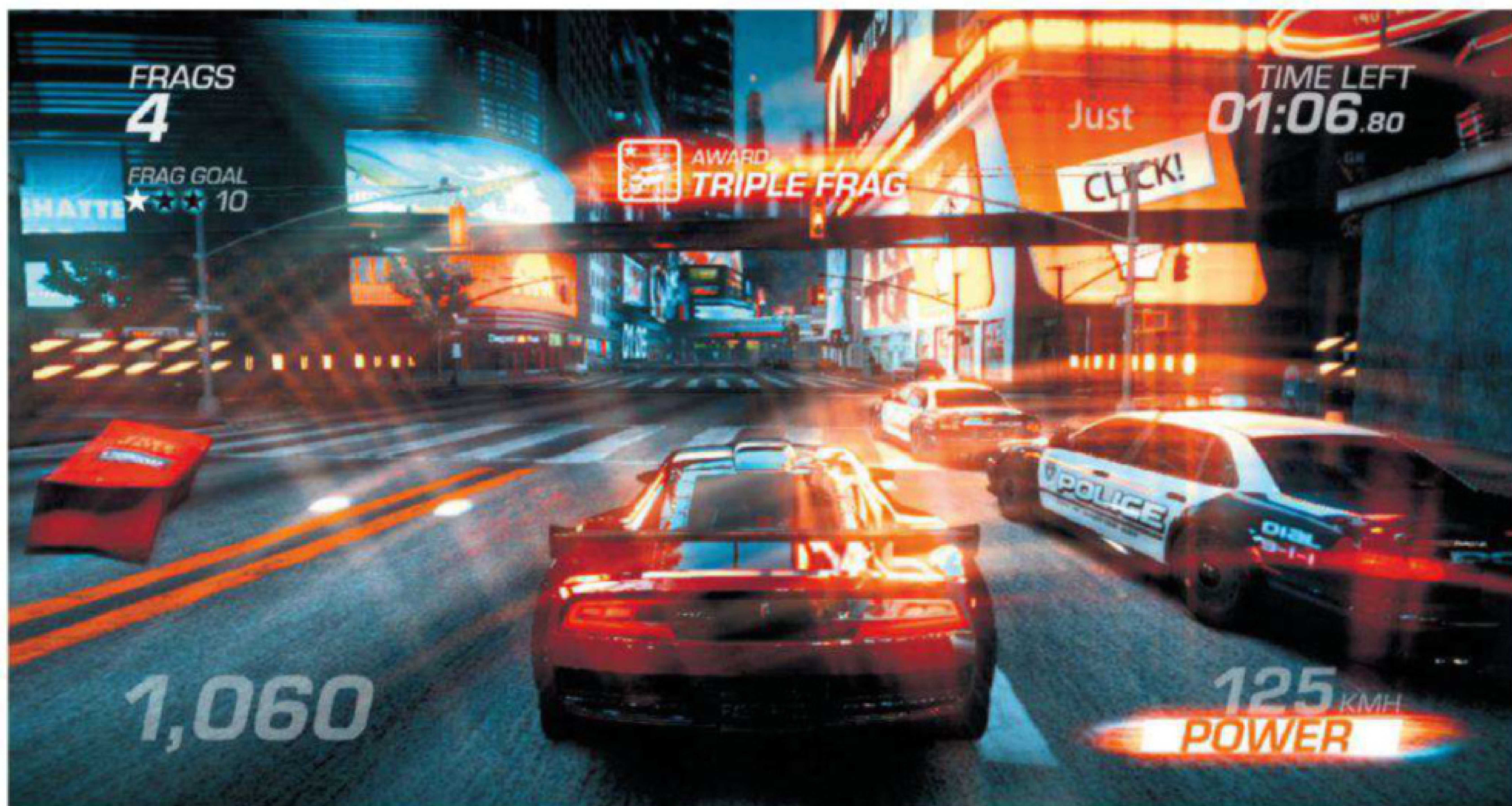
Heavy handling, which carries more DNA from *FlatOut* than it does from classic *Ridge Racer*, presents a tough learning curve, especially for those unacquainted with Bugbear, but the game's infrastructure lends a helping hand to struggling players. Finishing a race, whether you end up in pole or pitiful position, still grants valuable points depending on how successfully you misbehave. Ranking up your profile unlocks new vehicles, which can also help you to get back in the game and kick starts the process of unlocking those new challenges and districts.

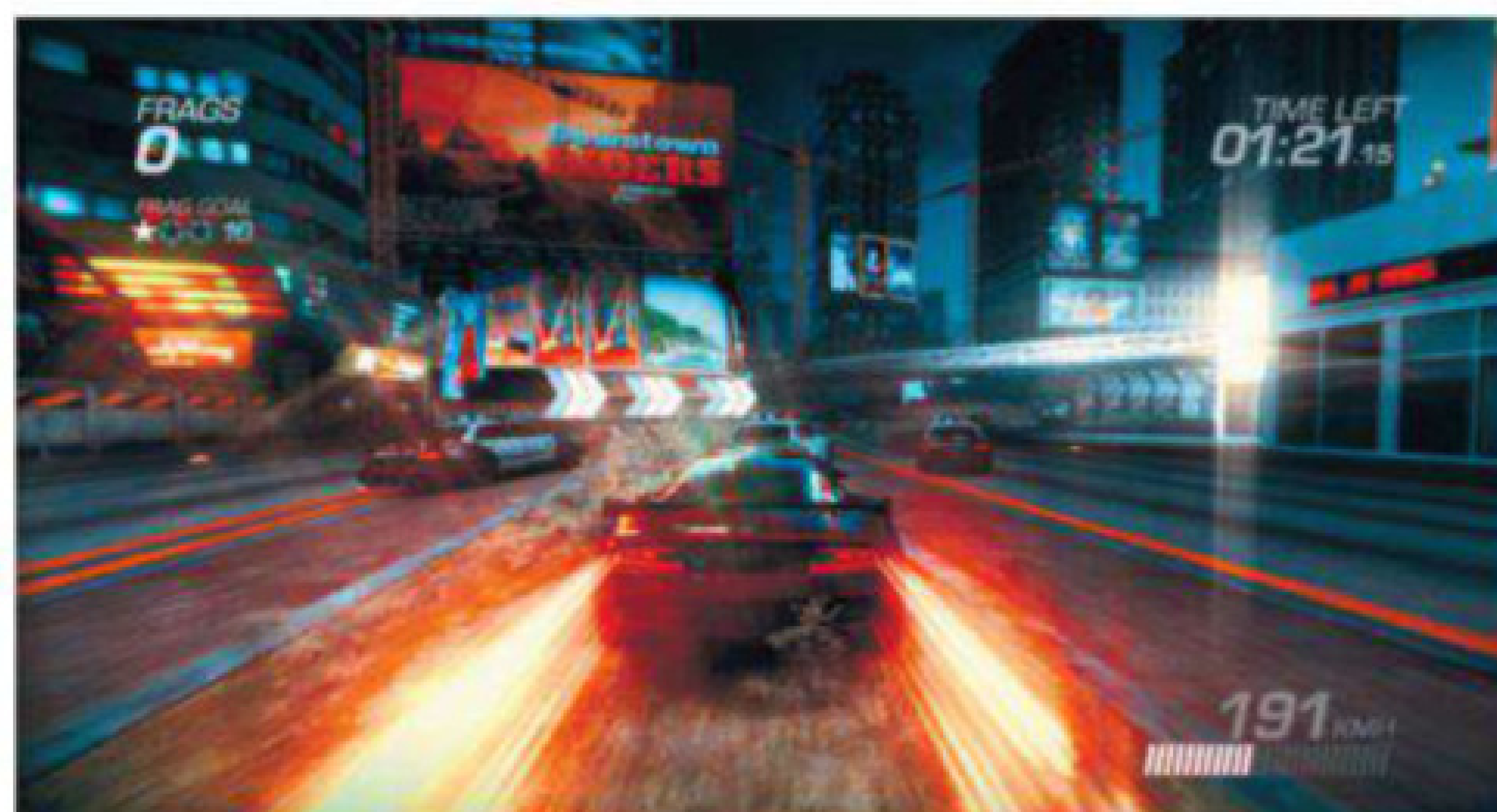
But it's not just places and powerful motors you're after; progress feeds into the track editor, opening up new map pieces for you to patch into your own city. The editor is no last-minute addition: it's a Forge-calibre DIY tool that enables you to publish your own creation, populated with all the jumps, obstacles and mayhem you can pack into the generous grid space. You can set event objectives, too, meaning that if the game's brilliant, brutal gauntlets aren't to your liking, you can effectively design your own campaign for you and others to enjoy and destroy.

This, then, is the game Bugbear has been working towards for the past decade, delivered with pedal-flooring confidence and made possible thanks to what initially seemed an unlikely collaboration between a Japanese publisher and Scandinavian developer. At a time when Japan seems determined to reach out to other territories with its intellectual property, it's also the most shining example yet of how to handpick a third party and provide it with the freedom and support to get it right on its own terms. *Ridge Racer* fans' first reaction may be to cry blasphemy at the rough, rugged world of *Unbounded*, but this new direction is refreshing and vital to a licence that hasn't been a legitimate contender since its glory days.

The action-racing genre has delivered numerous treats this generation, but not one of them has been as rewarding and relentlessly entertaining, nor as feature-packed, as this. This is *Ridge Racer* unbounded from the shackles of its heritage, rebuilt from the ground up into one of the most subversive, sublime street-racing games ever made.

9







ABOVE Successfully blow a rival to smithereens and you're rewarded with a glorious, slow-mo reel of your opponent's undoing. It's skippable, though, so you can jump straight back into the action without missing a beat

ABOVE Your 11 opponents range from cunning to crazy during *Unbounded*'s Domination races, driving you into walls and ramming and slamming into you whenever they're within striking distance. They'll often wipe you out entirely if you're driving a weaker vehicle. RIGHT Vehicles come in a mixture of four-wheel drive and more traditional sporty numbers, all unlicensed and breathtaking in their starting grid state. It's not long, however, before they're cracked, crushed and crumpled ghosts of their former selves



Post Script

Interview: Joonas Laakso, producer at Bugbear

Bugbear producer **Joonas Laakso** explains why those who view *Ridge Racer Unbounded* as a mere *FlatOut* clone are way off track, why working with Namco packed some surprises, and how his team went about deciding which objects can and can't be destroyed.

How did your *FlatOut* experience influence the production of *Unbounded*?
Lots of fans have said essentially this is *FlatOut* 3, or 4, or whatever – not to us, it isn't. If we were making a *FlatOut* game, it would be different, more towards the original game – run-down machines and so on. In terms of the physics, it feels like the same sort of game, but on a philosophical or higher level, it's quite different. *FlatOut* was about avoiding failure; here, we tried to turn that round. As far as we go, it's not a *FlatOut* game.

Did you carry over any specific tech?
While the engine is completely proprietary, you might say it's got *FlatOut* genes. There's plenty shared, especially in the physics back-end, but the rendering has been redone for *Unbounded*. I guess physics is the one thing we do carry over, and wholly own as well.

There's a language to the scenery of the game. How did you go about establishing what would and wouldn't be destructible?
I can't say it was easy; there was a fair bit of back and forth about what should be destroyed and what shouldn't. At one point, it seemed easier to go through pretty much everything, but that did not translate well to gameplay. So you have to devise some thresholds. What we tried to do was [make it that] if it's obviously heavier than a car, then [it's] likely you can't through it. Anything lighter than a car, you should be able to go through without consequences. Generally, if it's lower or narrower than a car, then it's fair game.

We thought about going more overboard with signalling, telling the player [what was destroyable], but it didn't feel right making it more clear cut. We see some people that don't quite get it, there's uncertainty, but once you take that first step you should get it.

Was it a difficult process to design an entire city as an urban racecourse?
Oh, yeah, I would say that has been the biggest design problem. We started out just trying to figure out how to create a city you could drive in. Creating a city is one challenge, creating a race track is another. We ended up trying to adhere to real-world examples as far as we could and tweaking them for playability. We used an awful lot of reference photographs and satellite footage. It's mostly influenced by New York and Chicago.



"We ended up trying to adhere to real-world examples as far as we could and tweaking them for playability"



Unbounded has a distinct visual style, with elements of classic *Ridge Racer* – were you fans of the series?
Personally, yes; I especially played the PSP original a lot. I would wager I played that more than anything else on PSP. There are some fans of *Ridge Racer Type 4* in the studio, too. I wouldn't say it was a favourite before this assignment, but we were aware of the heritage.

There's a strong use of colour in *Unbounded* – teal and orange specifically. Did you borrow that from current Hollywood cinematography trends?
I wouldn't say we borrowed it; we took notice that it works. It does seem to a degree that's all Hollywood is doing. We decided not to be too precious about it; in terms of the lighting, we did want to find something distinctive. I don't want to say we overdid it, but I will anyway: we maybe went a little overboard with all the glare – but I think it works.

Did you look at other racing series, such as *Need For Speed* or *Split Second*? There are elements of other titles in *Unbounded*, but it doesn't feel like a copycat.
Probably some entries in the *Burnout* series and *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*, which was a really good game – I'm not sure why it's not had more attention. *Split Second*, obviously. We're doing some of the things they are, and I really wanted that game to do better.

Did Namco give you creative freedom?
Oh, absolutely. I've been shocked by how little they wanted to dictate. There have been some elements of the game they've been vocal about, which I'm not going to identify, but they're things you wouldn't expect. It wasn't about pushing it towards a more *Ridge Racer* direction. It was pretty much the opposite. We'd been wanting that direction, as it felt more and more right for the game, whereas Namco has been open to trying something new and opening it up to a new audience. But we did get feedback on every single thing, which was great so we weren't left in the dark. We worked as closely as you can get without a common language: visits, video calls, emails and so forth. During the design phase, they were active in everything.

Do you feel you're targeting a new audience here, rather than series fans?
We never had a brief saying who we should target. We've been trying to make the best racing game we can.

What about a sequel?
I think Namco has said it'd like to see *Unbounded 2*, and where it can take that, but we don't know yet. We have enjoyed working with them and would like to again. ■

Silent Hill: Downpour

As the opening minutes of *Silent Hill: Downpour* attest, it doesn't get much more grisly than execution-style murder in a prison shower. The hard, smooth surface of its floor and walls too easily conjure the impression of a butcher's shop, its tiles simply waiting to be wiped clean with a cloth and the blood rinsed into a floor drain. Showers are where people take off their clothes and spend a few minutes in their most vulnerable state, which is why the idea of violence – sexual or otherwise – in a shower setting is so uniquely disturbing. There are reams of precedent for this in film, from Hitchcock's Psycho to the bathhouse knife fight in Cronenberg's Eastern Promises. The scenario never gets easier to stomach.

If *Downpour*'s shower room is a butcher shop, your victim – a fellow convict – is a corn-fattened hog, repulsive with his droopy breasts and a scarred paunch sagging over a waist towel. Without a weapon or the athleticism to defend himself, he just whimpers and calls for help as this sordid gameplay tutorial flashes the attack button prompt. Press X to send prisoner Murphy Pendleton's blade jabbing with a squelchy slap into your victim's clavicle. No amount of arm waving and hopping about in front of the security camera will do this sorry side of pork any good.

Moments earlier, the dirty guard who coerced you into this errand has you turn on all the showers to fill the room with steam, thwarting the camera's gaze. The water spraying from the shower heads foreshadows the game's titular downpour; the steam mimics the eerie fog that's been a staple of the *Silent Hill* franchise since the very beginning. It's a potent sequence whose effect could only be neutered by Pendleton waking up with a start on his prison bunk. Of course, that's exactly what happens. Press Y to realise it was all just a dream; hold B to suppress your groan reflex.

This opening sequence is emblematic of the larger *Downpour* experience, which repeatedly frustrates by inflating our hopes with delightfully squirm-inducing tension and violence, only for appalling design ideas to squash the proceedings whoopee-cushion flat. You'll meander around lost for an hour because you didn't notice a door concealed in the pitch-black corner of a room, correctly surmise the method for solving a puzzle but have a speck of obtuse logic block your success, and spit curses at the Objectives page in your notebook for only listing items you've already completed.

Such foibles are enough to drive you mad in the real world, which is a pity given how expertly Vatra's artists and animators simulate mental decay when they set their minds to it. The most visually arresting moments of the game involve *Silent Hill*'s drab world peeling back in an abruptly hallucinogenic turn to reveal a vivid otherworld that evokes Ken Kesey's 1960s 'Acid Tests' and MC Escher at his most architecturally exuberant.

Publisher Konami
Developer Vatra Games
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

Its foibles are enough to drive you mad, which is a pity given how expertly Vatra's artists can simulate mental decay



In this realm, you will solve puzzles one moment, and flee down corridors away from a throbbing red vortex the next. In other words, the game looks best when it takes a break from looking stereotypically Unreal and focuses all of its energy on looking simply unreal.

The story proper gets under way after the bus transferring Pendleton and a group of other prisoners to a different lock-up facility careens off the road into a wooded gorge – a sequence lifted straight from The Fugitive – and our antihero finds himself marooned in Silent Hill. He's still smarting from the loss of his son and struggling to come to grips with how the tragedy transpired. As the earlier dream sequence suggested, he has done awful things, but he's also had awful things befall him. His grip on reality grows increasingly tenuous, and he's not the only one to survive the crash. A curiously embittered guard also managed to escape with her life and hunts him with unflagging resolve.

Vatra groomed its Silent Hill to feel artfully vacant. Even the company of monsters renders a setting less lonely. When they do arrive, you'll wish you could borrow Pendleton's gun and turn it on yourself. Lock-on is finicky, and you'll get accustomed to swinging melee weapons haplessly in the wrong direction. During fights with multiple banshees, the framerate often resembles a Skype conference over a poor connection. And in an attempt to clear the screen of immersion-breaking HUD elements, *Downpour* buries your exact health percentage in the start menu under 'Statistics'. If you don't want to pause the fight every few seconds, you're left to guess based on your worsening limp and how much blood's accumulated on your shirt, never quite certain how long you can put off burning that next precious first-aid kit.

The game's refusal to incentivise combat through rewards for killing enemies – or force it by gating your progress until they're dispatched – seems like a tacit mea culpa. And it doesn't help that the penalty for dying involves staring at a patience-trying load screen that flashes tips such as: "If you get stuck on a puzzle, try approaching it from a different angle".

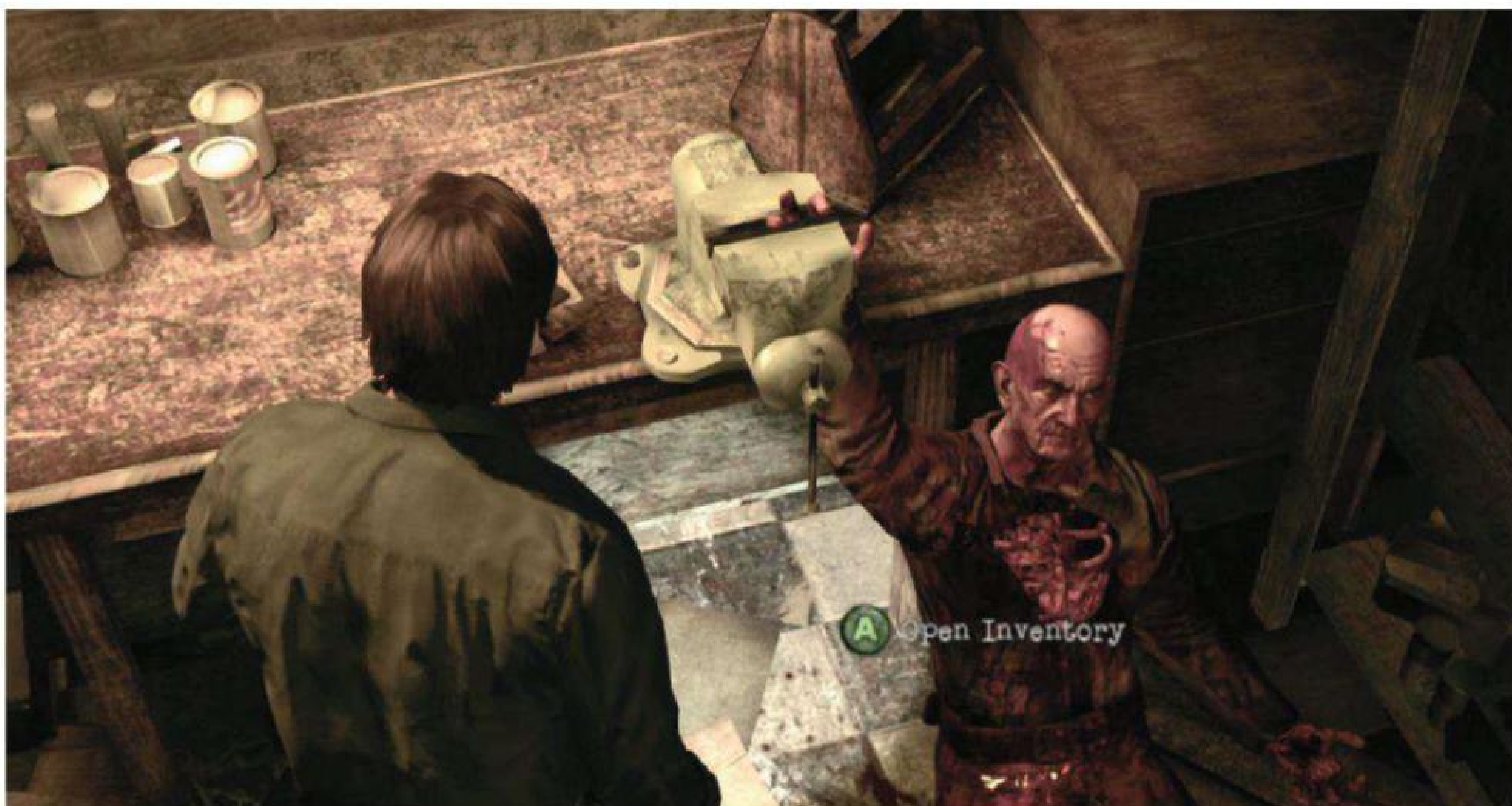
With combat proving such a drag, your interest in untangling Pendleton's tale of woe will determine whether or not you press on. The collectible memos, letters and other assorted clues are engaging, but the insistence on surprising players prompts some eye-rolling revelations. As far as plot-twist clichés go, *Downpour* trots out all of the usual suspects.

You'll be tempted to bail out early, but we'd urge to wait until you've witnessed *Downpour*'s one genuinely astonishing set-piece, which involves an abandoned children's production of Hansel and Gretel. It's a sequence that bends reality so deftly you'll feel like Lucy backing through wardrobe coats until she feels Narnia's branches scratching her neck.

6



LEFT Holding the left bumper button allows you to peer over your shoulder, a trick that comes in handy during otherworld sequences where you're being pursued down corridors by a pulsing red vortex. BELOW Exploring houses in the town of Silent Hill will reveal sidequests, such as this bizarre one that has you trying to locate the heart that's been removed from this murdered man's chest





ABOVE Encounters with children during a level set in an abandoned orphanage will force protagonist Murphy Pendleton to confront his grief over losing his own son. The plot hinges on discovering how he died





Some of *Downpour's* creepy thrills are expertly delivered by the juxtaposition of placid settings and grisly violence

Post Script

What other games in the horror genre can learn from Downpour

Design flaws create a fog of distraction around a game, hindering our ability to focus on the virtues it possesses. This is certainly the case with *Downpour*. There's no need to rehash our litany of gripes here, since they're catalogued in the review, and the game will likely be forced to atone for its sins on the day of retail judgment anyway. It's just a pity the game can't be recommended without caveat. After all, buried alive beneath *Downpour's* landslide of design snafus are some of the most thoughtfully crafted videogame chills we've encountered in ages.

Horror games have refined their scare tactics to jump-inducing perfection. *Dead Space*, for example, gets you over and over again by cuing up a brash orchestral sting right as a spider-limbed necromorph bursts from a ventilation shaft overhead. Taking pride in delivering these kind of scares, however, is the horror genre equivalent of sneaking up behind your victim, sucker punching him out cold with a jab to the back of the skull, and then bragging to your friends about how you bested him in a duel. The poor dupe clearly never stood a chance.

Downpour's spookiest beats are far more subtle and stay with you longer, burrowing under your skin before they start to wriggle about like hatching larvae. The game doesn't set out to make you jump, so much as squirm. So you'll find a journal page in a crusty motel on which the author has handwritten in meticulous detail exactly how several female occupants passed their evening. At 8:42pm, the woman in room 5B dressed for bed in a pink nightie, no panties, lights off at 9:23pm. After a line mentioning the woman in room 6A shaving her legs in the bathtub, the writer scribbles three exclamation points inside a set of parentheses. All the necromorphs and all the ventilation shafts in the world can't out-creep this voyeur's leg-shaving fetish.

That journal entry would be disturbing if you'd read it in the context of a novel, but *Downpour* offers the sensation of discovering it for yourself. This is the very same motel, after all, whose deserted rooms you'll be exploring in search of a change of clothes to replace your prison garb. The replacement suit of clothes you end up salvaging might have even belonged to that sicko. You'll never know what happened to those women, or if the writer acted on his urges. You'll just never know, and the stillness all around leaves too much space for your thoughts to instinctively fill in the gaps with grotesque scenarios.

At another point in the game, you'll encounter a children's playground outside an orphanage. Like every other setting in *Downpour*, there's a post-apocalyptic hush in the air. A tyre swing hangs forlornly on a branch. A swing set lies fallow. There are no children in sight. You make your way past, about to enter the building, but decide to spin around and take in the scene one last time. Without any grand announcement, the tyre swing has quietly been replaced with a corpse dangling limp, a rope noose hugging his throat. That the game doesn't remark on this event with a startling audio cue makes it even more unsettling, like God napping unaware while some curse transpires beneath his nose.

Nobody appreciates being told what to feel. Part of what makes a game such as Playdead's *Limbo* so unnerving is the way its famous spider scuttles about without hissing and screeching. Its silence makes it more sinister, more alien and unknowable. *Downpour* shows a similar respect for its audience, proving that all a work of horror needs to do is light the bomb's fuse and slip it in the audience's back pocket. Plant that fear or suspicion in the player and then let it burn down until they feel like they're going to explode from the tension. Hopefully, other games in the horror genre will take a cue from Vatra's work in *Silent Hill: Downpour* and stop taking a mallet to preemptively wallop the bomb itself. ■

Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City

Publisher Capcom
Developer Slant Six
Format 360, PS3
Release Out now (EU, US), April 26 (Japan)

For a series all about gruesome and unlikely transformations, *Resident Evil* has never been afraid to let life imitate art. For every successful strain of mutation – *Resident Evil 4*'s merging of high-octane action and traditional survival horror – there's a host of stunted, withering branches on the evolutionary tree. Lightgun games have until now been the series' traditional nadir, but *Operation Raccoon City* makes an enthusiastic assault on the claim.

A squad-based co-operative shooter, *Operation Raccoon City* is pointless played alone. On the higher difficulties, AI teammates fail to contribute much beyond generic dialogue. On Normal, the game is still a dull slog, with three enemy factions (zombies, special forces soldiers and the more exotic BOWs) offering three distinct flavours of tedium. The undead can be easily mowed down, but they attack en masse; the BOWs (lickers, hunters et al) tend to favour charges followed by up-close slashes and thumps; and the special forces soldiers behave like the grunts from any cover-based shooter released over the past decade. Their AI is serviceable, but combat still feels awkwardly clunky. Shotguns lack the punch you'd expect, and ordinary humans take too many hits to put down.

Play with friends and you'll have a better time, naturally, although no amount of fraternal spirit can sufficiently pave over the maddening design calls potholing this experience. Campaign levels funnel you through dull city streets and even duller zombie-filled laboratories. Like *Left 4 Dead*, set-piece encounters see you and your chums holding a position against waves of decomposing foes. But unlike Valve's series, which populates its horde with a set of special infected types that necessitate swift teamwork and improvised tactics, *Operation Raccoon City* fails to throw anything at you that requires an approach more sophisticated than aiming for its weak spot. On occasion, one of your party may get infected via a zombie attack, and healthy players must then euthanise the infected one before he or she turns on the rest of the group. It's an intriguing idea, but one that is spectacularly undermined by the fact that you can then immediately revive them.

The story hinges on Umbrella's shady wetwork unit, made up of standard military clichés, and weaves in and out of the second and third games in the series. Occasionally, you'll recognise a chunk of level design from *RE2* or 3 – the stuffed tiger outside Police Chief Irons' office, for instance, or the helicopter crash from *Nemesis*. These bursts of familiarity are the most exciting elements of the campaign levels, which over-leverage vague recognition rather than fashioning any memorable locations of their own. This is creative anemia masquerading as homage, and it's exposed by *Operation Raccoon City*'s inability to add anything of its own to the series' increasingly jam-packed lore.

An entertaining glitch saw us fight the final 'boss' while he was invisible… That's a whole new type of survival horror



And if Capcom intends for such nostalgia to make shooting waves of lickers, hunters and the occasional tyrant more exciting, it undermines it with an art style that manages to suck the gruesome body horror out of *Resident Evil* and replace it with the kind of muscular shininess sported by the Locust in *Gears Of War*. In *RE2*, the mutated William Birkin looked horrific. Now he looks like the Hulk, only much less incredible.

Still, at least Birkin's character model had the good grace to turn up – a particularly entertaining glitch saw us fight the final 'boss' of the game while he was inexplicably invisible. Trying to defeat a tyrant that has backed you into a wall with no hope of escape is one thing, but trying to shoot what is essentially a floating gun? That's a whole new type of survival horror.

A fulsome suite of vs modes do all they can to atone for the bland campaign, and their blend of cooperation, competition and undead environmental danger is, for a while, successful. The standard deathmatch is given a score-attack twist: two teams compete to rack up the highest total they can through killing zombies and BOWs, but even higher scores are awarded for killing each other. The presence of the undead adds a grisly wild card to what would otherwise be standard encounters, and smart play will see players make tough choices between assaulting a well-entrenched opposing team or racking up points by killing infected cannon fodder.

A survival mode adds another twist – teams earn bonus points for making it first to the (apparently quite cramped) escape chopper. It's these modes that offer a glimpse of *Operation Raccoon City*'s true potential, eschewing the attempts at *Left 4 Dead* narrative-building and focusing instead on anarchic carnage between organised players and the massed horde between them. That said, they're still undermined by lacklustre shooting – the fundamental flaw at the core of the title, and one that an upgrade system allowing you to unlock and improve weapons and abilities can only partially hide.

Slant Six Games cut its teeth on handheld *SOCOM* games, but no tactical subtlety has filtered down to this title. *Operation Raccoon City* is a gory duck shoot in a series that's already produced the definitive action game, and letting you experience its gore-soaked trudge with friends is its only genuine appeal. With *Resident Evil 6*'s trailers promising a true continuation of the fourth and fifth games' action focus, it's hard to see what this distinctly low-budget shooter has to offer beyond yet another return visit to already blood-saturated and well-trodden ground.

3



ABOVE Close encounters such as this can cause you to become infected, your health bar turning blue, and slowly depleting before you turn into a zombie that will go on to hunt down your allies. LEFT As well as the dogs, classic enemies return, such as *Resident Evil 2*'s zombified cops, hunters, lickers and even *Resident Evil 3*'s trenchcoat-wearing Nemesis

BELOW While they're definitely T-virus infected rather than the hosts of *Resident Evil 4*'s parasitic Las Plagas, *Operation Raccoon City*'s zombies move a little faster than their 1990s counterparts



ABOVE As you progress, the game introduces different zombie types based on the various victims of the outbreak, such as this special forces soldier. Return visits to familiar locations also demonstrate the increasing anarchy



Ninja Gaiden 3

Publisher Tecmo Koei
Developer Team Ninja
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

Team Ninja's 2004 *Ninja Gaiden* and its sequel are two of the best titles to have been forged in the fires of Japanese action game development. Survival in Tomonobu Itagaki's world of killer katanas requires economy of movement, split-second timing and keen spatial awareness. They stand as games where discipline and determination are rewarded emotionally and psychologically, and you must know your enemy as well as your inventory to survive. They're like *Demon Souls* gone hyperactive, and with buckets of blood.

It's therefore hard to envy the 'new' Team Ninja's task of succeeding, or even continuing, that legacy of quality, and it's easy to see the reasons behind *Ninja Gaiden 3*'s missteps. An attempt to broaden the player base and take the brand from the niche to the newcomer means the experience now feels shallow, constantly in the shadow of its forebears. Meanwhile, the absence of item management, weapon customisation (the scythe and talons are due as DLC in the weeks after release), varied choice of Ninpo attacks or even a deep moves list strips away a crucial layer of tactics and involvement.

Combat maintains the same core pillars of light, heavy and projectile attacks, and Ryu moves with the same sense of weight and athleticism as before. What's new is an overreliance on button prompts, even in the core ground-level skirmishes. Finishing moves throw up a prompt to deliver an excessively gory killing strike, and the camera slams in to frame the moment with an extreme close-up. It's a stylish bit of visual feedback, but it also disorients you, often resetting your field of vision and damaging forward thinking. Furthermore, it breaks the flow of a fight, and for the most part *Ninja Gaiden 3*'s duels are chaotic affairs. Peripheral enemies rattle off machine-gun fire, launch rockets and shoot other (occasionally offscreen) projectiles into the mix. This is difficulty by way of quantity of threat, not quality or intricacy of game design.

The obsession with onscreen prompts doesn't just infect the combat, though. Scaling walls via the Kunai Climb (which requires the repeated bashing of L1 and R1) is a diabolical ask in a series where graceful fluidity of motion has always been a hallmark. In the past, *Ninja Gaiden*'s platforming was a seamless change of pace, with collectibles and items encouraging you to explore its world – something made irresistible by the elegance of Hayabusa's movement and the finesse of the responsive controls. Here, traversing walls and ropes is a chore, and one that you'll be repeating throughout the entirety of the lengthy story mode.

Boss battles, though no longer punishing in their difficulty, are infuriating in their own right, loaded and burdened with QTEs, and often employing awkward fixed cameras that make return playthroughs uninviting. The more casual approach to the design does offer up some benefits to ease the frustration: there's a generous number of checkpoints throughout, plus regular opportunities to save and replenish health (which also recharges after you've cleared a wave of foes).

> The middle act, however, is worth fighting for. It manages a U-turn that almost makes the early grind a dim memory



The middle act of *Ninja Gaiden 3*, however, is worth fighting for. It manages a U-turn that almost makes the early grind work a dim memory, with a greater variety of villains finally forcing you to counter, dodge and think about each strike, eyeing up gaps in attack patterns and unleashing your special attacks carefully, rather than spamming the buttons. QTEs become less of a nuisance as well, and help to punctuate some quite thrilling action sequences that are as enjoyable to watch as successfully execute. Yet despite the reward of this dazzling section, the final stretch of the game is a repetitive drive to the finish that recycles enemy types as the plot spirals ridiculously out of control.

The story has a firm hand in *Ninja Gaiden 3*'s identity crisis. Hayabusa's globetrotting – he's on the hunt for a terrorist gang called Lords Of Alchemy – offers up a variety of settings from London and Saudi Arabia to Antarctica and Japan, but none leave an impression. Stages are mostly made up of rigid dens for you to swipe and swing your sword about in, and there's none of the scale, scope or colourful creativity of previous titles. The standout, tellingly, is a section set in Hayabusa Village, evoking memories of past games while delivering some vicious gauntlets of rival ninjas. In these passing moments, as ninjas whelp and blades whirl, we're reminded of where Hayabusa came from, and just how much we miss it. For all the talk of a heavyweight hero's journey, the narrative is a congested mess of ideas. Team Ninja's productions have never excelled in their storytelling, and they've often wisely shied away from it. The tall tale of Hayabusa's battle across the continents attempts to tackle the themes of consequence and allegiance, but it ends up a tangled concoction that will likely perplex the new players the game's more accessible action is meant to entice.

While you may be deterred from taking on a repeat playthrough by the sheer repetition and dearth of ideas – the absence of a skill and weapon tree hurts more than any blade wound – some bells and whistles are provided in the form of the shallow challenge and multiplayer modes. It's a shame co-op is reserved for specific challenges, though, since a number of in-game scenarios see you joined by a (badly trained) AI companion, making you long for human interaction.

This is a less accomplished but more immediate *Ninja Gaiden*, then, one that will temporarily distract newcomers and disappoint dedicated followers. Yet it feels destined to be forgotten by both audiences, chalked up as another casualty in the east's drive to conquer the west with bravado rather than its sought-after, ever-rarer Japanese steel.

5





ABOVE *Ninja Gaiden 3* often feels more in line with FromSoftware's *Ninja Blade* (itself, ironically, owing a debt to Itagaki's originals), with hefty doses of cinematic flair and bombast in place of delicate action game craft

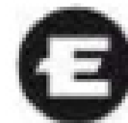




ABOVE If you don't like seeing relentless button prompts, you can switch them off, but it also means you won't be given any prompts at all, including essential QTE hints. It's a choice of all or nothing. LEFT Along with a stock of lethal shuriken, Hayabusa's trusty bow plays a role in skewering your foes from a distance. The bow's auto-aim is too generous, although it does keep the action kicking along

Street Fighter X Tekken

Publisher Capcom
Developer In-house
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now


www.bit.ly/zNZoQG
Screenshot gallery

Street Fighter X Tekken starts with a tutorial, a first for a Capcom fighting game. It covers the basics, then walks you through an avalanche of systems. Coming before a single punch has been thrown in anger, it's an overwhelming amount of information, and even old hands will have forgotten some of it when it's over.

Much of that is down to the many ways in which you can use the Cross Gauge, a three-bar meter at the base of the screen that fills as you land and take hits, even if they're blocked. As well as the standard EX moves and Super Arts, there are counters and tag cancels, which bring in your teammate to either continue a combo or make a blocked move safe. When the meter's full, you can choose between a Cross Art – essentially each of your team's Super Arts performed in succession – or Cross Assault, which puts both of your characters onscreen for a few seconds. With so many options, meter management is more vital than ever.

SFXT is a team game, but the round's over as soon as one of your fighters' health is depleted. So as well as keeping an eye on the Cross Gauge at the base of the screen, attention must be paid to the bars at the top. And while the game runs at a slightly faster pace than *Street Fighter IV*, combo timings are far more lenient, thanks in large part to Cross Rush, a basic combo available to every member of the cast.

The *Street Fighter* series' combo systems have typically been designed around links – for an attack to connect, it has to be input at the precise moment the animation of the previous move finishes. *Tekken*, meanwhile, often uses chains, wherein the required button presses can be tapped out with less strict timing. One of the reasons the *Tekken* characters feel so at home here is Capcom's decision to incorporate chains into *SFXT*. Tap a light, medium and then two heavy attacks, and you'll launch your opponent into the air, with your teammate running in to continue the combo. It's enormously powerful for such a basic technique, but is wildly unsafe when blocked, and chains can't be cancelled into special moves (although you can follow up with an EX move or Super Art).

The emphasis on chains over links is a welcome one after *Street Fighter IV*'s overly precise combo system. Yet any suggestion that Capcom has dumbed down to appeal to a wider audience is off the mark: tight links are still here, and advanced players will employ a mixture of the two for increased damage. And once an opponent's in the air, the real fun begins.

While *Street Fighter* has featured juggles before, they've been situational, only working in the corner or against certain characters. Here, they're ubiquitous, and your opponent can be hit from the moment they leave the ground to the instant they return to it. Even then, a ground or wall bounce move can keep the combo going. As in *Tekken*, if a move looks like it should connect, it will. But there are limits, which have been put in place in order to stave off the threat of infinite combos being discovered once *SFXT* is in the hands of players.

Any suggestion that Capcom's dumbed down to appeal to a wider audience is off the mark: tight links are still here



Street Fighter IV players expecting a smooth transition – the two games share an engine, after all – may be in for a shock. *SFIV*'s Focus Attack has no equivalent here, for instance, and attempting to absorb a fireball with the technique will result in your teammate tagging in to receive a face full of plasma. But after a brief adjustment period, *SFIV* players will revel in the extra opportunities for flashy, extended combos.

Those coming from *Tekken* will probably take a little longer to settle in, but may also be surprised at how faithful Namco characters are to their original forms. Moves have been logically altered to fit *Street Fighter*'s inputs – Law's three-hit spin kick is a natural fit for the Hurricane Kick motion – and each fighter has an extended list of unique moves, which are normal kicks or punches modified with a directional tap. These set up follow-up attacks, many of which are chains, and alternate between high and low hits to force an opponent to block accordingly, a key *Tekken* mechanic.

Significant effort has been put into customisation, too, with both user-defined costume colours and the gem system, *SFXT*'s most controversial mechanic. Each character takes three gems into a match to momentarily boost damage, defence, speed or the rate at which your meter builds. For beginners, there are gems that block attacks or escape throws at the cost of a chunk of Cross Gauge; for advanced players, there's the prospect of hundreds of hours of tinkering to find devious loadouts. Our fear that gems would unbalance the game proved unfounded. Their effects are simply too brief, limited in most cases to ten or 15 seconds.

With customisation comes a natural focus on microtransactions, and Capcom doubtless has a steady flow of costumes, colours and gems planned to ensure a busy DLC schedule for the months to come. Indeed, *SFXT* has been designed with longevity in mind, and while producer Yoshinori Ono's insistence that there will be no disc-based revision of the game is a welcome one, it sticks in the craw to learn that 12 characters are on the disc, waiting to be unlocked by a DLC update later in the year. While Capcom's business strategies are disappointing, however, the game itself is a joy.

We scoffed when it was first announced, and when Ono's worldwide tour with *Tekken*'s Katsuhiro Harada gave the impression that it was all a bit of a lark. But *SFXT* successfully combines the best of world's most popular 2D and 3D fighting games, proves Capcom's most newcomer-friendly fighter, and boasts a combat system of bewildering depth. If any company was going to move the genre forward, it seems fitting that it's the one that built its foundations.

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ABOVE As in *Street Fighter IV*, the match begins with some trash talk from combatants. Official teams (of fighters paired up on the character select screen) have unique, animated intros and individual Arcade mode endings



TOP Throws are now shown with a quick spin and zoom of the camera, a change that seems unnecessary until you see the finer details in slow motion. No wonder Sagat looks terrified: Poison's gender is a topic of continuing debate. ABOVE Lili's lurid green outline here means she's activated a speed gem. These were among the most controversial boosts when the system was first announced, until Capcom clarified that they only affect movement speed, with move properties remaining unchanged. RIGHT While Kazuya and Jin shoot lasers from their eyes in their Super Arts, only Jin has a 'projectile' move, athough it doesn't travel across the screen; instead it appears in a fixed location and then hangs in place for a second



Pandora's Tower

A fantasy land. A damsel in distress. She has a lover, a questing hero. His challenge? To slay 13 beasts secreted around the world in order to restore her to health. Fumito Ueda's colossal shadow hangs over Ganbarion's first title, the final in a series of three JRPGs – following *The Last Story* and *Xenoblade* – that has seen Wii's twilight years play host to some of the keenest experimentation with the mechanics and tropes of this venerable genre.

Pandora's Tower is perhaps the most experimental of all, an action-RPG that takes its cues from *God Of War* as much as *Final Fantasy*. While protagonist Aeron might have the fey demeanour and highly decorative yet only partially concealing armour of your typical JRPG lead, he's also got a chain weapon that rivals Kratos's Blades Of Chaos. Combat is built around a standard range of swipes, dodges and slashes, but at any time in the fray aiming the pointer at an enemy and pressing B on the Remote will fling Aeron's chain at them. Snare in place, the tension in the grip can be increased by pulling away from the entangled beast or holding down a button on the nunchuck. And once the tension is at maximum, shaking the Remote will deal out a high-damage attack against your chained foe.

It's an empowering idea that weds gesture controls to the combo-based mechanics of an action title, meaning that you can flit between fighting the enemies directly in front of you and at range in an instant. Later additions to the chain's repertoire allow you to grip and fling your foes, slash at them, and even tie two enemies together. Once a pair of enemies are tied, attacking one will damage the other for as long as the chain holds. Aeron's chain also has environmental functions outside of combat that see it playing the role of, among other things, a surprisingly effective substitute for Link's hookshot.

But the promise of *Devil May Cry* crossed with *The Legend Of Zelda* isn't quite delivered. Aeron's too sluggish, for one thing, lacking the supple flexibility of Bayonetta or Dante in a scrap, and failing to compensate with anything like Kratos's beefy brutality. His combos are crude, and can't be strung together with the kind of freewheeling creativity that gives you a feeling of genuine mastery over the character. Enemy designs, while not without personality, aren't sophisticated enough either, lacking the audio and visual cues that help to telegraph attacks and signal successful hits of your own. Most disappointing of all, given the clever chain techniques on offer, is that it's hard to elegantly switch between the chain and a melee weapon mid-battle, giving a staccato rhythm to what should be fluid.

Boss encounters fare better: these lumbering beasts (which, like *Shadow Of The Colossus*'s colossi, usually innocently wait for you to land the first blow) offer more thought-out interplay between chain, enemy and environment. They're unashamedly 'aim for the glowing weak point' encounters, but on occasion clever ones.

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Ganbarion
Format Wii
Release Out now (Japan), April 13 (EU)

The only way to stop Aeron transforming is to bring her hunks of flesh ripped from the bodies of the tower's beasts



The reason Aeron is hunting these beasts – the masters of the 13 towers – is to save his beloved, Elena, from a particularly horrible fate. This damsel's unusual distress is that she's been cursed, and the only way to stop her transforming into a creature more gruesome than anything Aeron slays is to bring her hunks of flesh ripped from the bodies of the tower's beasts. As well as leaning refreshingly towards dark fairytale over the colourful sci-fi of many a JRPG, this setup offers more than simply a motivation. During missions, a timer in the bottom-right of the screen counts down towards Elena's transformation. If you don't kill the boss of the tower you're currently in and feed Elena its flesh before the timer reaches zero, you'll need to return to her mid-mission in order to top up the counter with meat taken from run-of-the-mill beasts. This in turn sets up a dynamic where you push upwards through a tower while carefully memorising shortcuts and unlocking routes towards its bottom.

It's a surprisingly effective motivator – the longer you take between missions, the more disfigured Elena becomes – and even then the gruesome scenes of her chomping on the restorative monster parts provide a surprisingly stomach-churning payoff to what is essentially a repeated fetch quest. Elena's presence within the game is further strengthened by the option to give her gifts and to talk to her between tower quests, with the relationship between the pair determining the course of the story.

But for all the surprising tenderness of *Pandora's Tower* narrative, there are other problems alongside the unsatisfactory combat. The chain might moonlight as a hookshot, but these level designs offer little of the ingenuity of *Zelda*'s dungeons, asking players to push through samey rooms and corridors in a series of what are essentially switch puzzles. And while the game's fixed camera angle avoids burdening you with any responsibility for framing the action, it doesn't do a terribly good job of it either – enemies have a frustrating habit of keeping a fight right on the transition between two angles. After a few too many instances of this, you'll almost swear they're doing it on purpose. An upgrade system is the most typically RPG thing about the overall experience, but it's also dully familiar, seeing you trade trinkets picked up on sorties for intangible boosts to stats.

A little slicker, and *Pandora's Tower* could have provided a surprisingly effective alternative in the character-action genre. Its blend of pointer controls and button-based combat begs to be further explored. But as it is, this a clunky action title – albeit one with a flicker of genuine emotion at its heart.

6



RIGHT Every tower has a visual signature of its own, though chains provide a recurring motif. Aeron's task is usually to track down the chains sealing the boss's chamber. BELOW As if being forced to eat the raw, pulsating flesh of a monster wasn't torture enough, the game is quick to establish that Elena's a vegetarian. There's a genuine sense of body horror to these scenes, as well as to Elena's transformations





ABOVE The weapons offer distinct combos and attack speeds, though none requires input more complex than frequent stabbing of the A button. It's a shame, because there are good ideas in combat that beg for refinement



Basic monsters drop flesh when killed with the chain, but Aeron's really after the boss characters. As with *Shadow Of The Colossus*, there are hints that his quest to kill these beasts is a selfish one

Armored Core V

The latest of FromSoftware's run-and-gun mecha romps is as good a place for newcomers to start as the revered *Armored Cores* 2 and 3, or the accessible *Armored Core: For Answer*. The customisation is as deep and straightforward as the latter, while a cleaner HUD condenses all crucial data (ammo, energy, health) into the series' traditionally oversized crosshair, removing a further layer of intimidation from *AC*'s barrier to entry.

The main mode – also playable in online co-op – offers short, sharp tutorials alongside a variety of bite-size missions that should satisfy stat-obsessed old hands while keeping the door open to pilgrims from instant-action backgrounds. Throughout the course of *ACV*'s campaign, newcomers will move along its delicate learning curve and from casual to hardcore. Before they know it, they'll be considering bullet drop, how loadout weights will affect the speed of their armoured core (AC), and whether agility's better than strength. There's still a challenge for veterans, though, with a wide range of enemies to keep them in the cockpit.

Missions are varied, spanning AC-on-AC warfare, linear seek-and-destroy offensives and large-scale bosses. They're merely the canvas on which to paint with your metal monster, however, because the real game in *ACV* is an introverted one. This is all about crafting a mech and unleashing it on the map, not a blockbuster masterclass in campaign design. The lack of environmental polish, mapping ugly textures to often massive scale, and other rough edges, from dull audio design to some underwhelming visual effects, will deter superficially minded players. But the core mechanics – the currency system, the weapon balancing and customisation – is where FromSoftware has lavished all its attention and where you should focus yours.

Multiplayer, at last, has a much stronger presence as well. Whether *ACV* can attract full lobbies remains to be seen, but the infrastructure is all in place and the frontend – a world map of single- and multiplayer options and objectives, plus a clan/team development dynamic – makes online more inviting than ever. Hop into the mode cold, though, and it's hard to survive. Amateur matches play out like rock paper scissors until you learn to analyse your foes' skills and weapon sets, and exploit their weaknesses. Team matches multiply the need for strategy, with the battle for territory on that global map a further incentive for competitive play.

As it stands, this is a solid and intricate *Armored Core* with the best online offering yet, lacking only the visual sheen to make the energy and pace of its combat shine. It's still an acquired taste, but once you've whetted your appetite, it's hard to resist.

8

Environments are mostly urban sprawls, offering places to hide and flank, while high-rises provide sniping positions. The sense of ownership of your AC is gripping, too; you can tinker with everything from weapons to colour

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer FromSoftware
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now



TANKING TALES

While *Armored Core V* is generally accessible, its story is less welcoming. It's a garbled mixture of offscreen characters and factions that will likely prove impenetrable to fresh players and too flyweight to offer the hardcore anything to invest in. Narrative has never been the series' strong suit, and the truth is the game would be as enjoyable, and perhaps even more so, without cutscene interruptions (although these can be skipped) and voiceovers.



Sine Mora

For a while, it was looking like the scrolling shooter was going to migrate over to smartphones entirely, Cave's responsive touchscreen controls countering the diminished screen size to deliver a series of fine examples of the art. Then along comes *Sine Mora*, which may be traditional in structure, but offers gameplay twists that feel at home on a controller, and visuals that can only be done justice on a big screen.

In *Sine Mora*, time is your essence – literally your health bar – with damage draining the ticking clock and success rewarding you with vital seconds. To aid you, there are three special abilities (AKA Capsules) to choose from and use in arcade mode: Roll Back to rewind time and perform corrective surgery on your route, Reflection to deflect attacks, and Speed Up to slow enemies to a crawl. Each transforms your strategy, and when combined with the range of ships and their unique special weapons, plus different difficulty settings, *Sine Mora* evolves from a thrilling arcade blast to wholly justifying a 1,200MP investment.

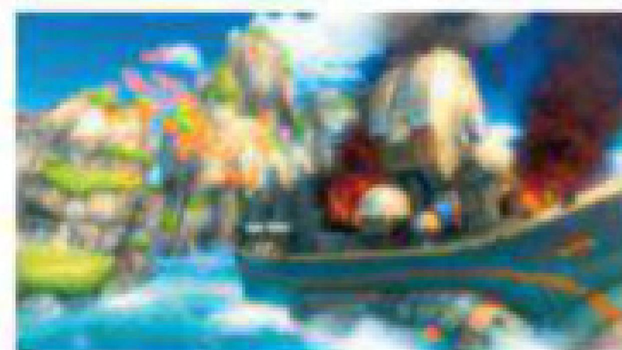
Story mode offers an entry point for anyone unacquainted with waves of fluorescent projectiles, giving amateurs the best learning curve the genre has to offer. Fighting through the short campaign opens up the numerous bosses in training mode, another concession to the casual, but one that veterans will embrace for its high-score-honing potential.

As with the best in this niche genre, *Sine Mora* isn't merely an exercise in hand-to-eye coordination and pattern recognition, but a sensory journey of sight and sound, the most polished and visually arresting this side of Taito's dual-screen *Darius Burst: Another Chronicle*. There's a variety to the short, gorgeous stages that pleasures the eyes even as enemy waves are bombarding them, with fore- and background detail clearly defined despite the consistent 3D-rendered aesthetic. With veteran sound designer Akira Yamaoka on audio duties, it's unsurprising to find the game has a memorable, complex and emotive soundscape. Sound effects add another layer of stimulation and feedback to all the shooting and collecting, with the chime of a scavenged pick-up a reward in itself.

Sine Mora doesn't just push the mechanical boundaries of scrolling shooters on home consoles; with its training and story modes it lowers the high barrier to entry, offering a feature set worthy of a boxed release and with the production values to match. It's another shining example of a European developer handling Japanese IP with care, remixing and refreshing the genres Japan's native developers often struggle to enhance and honour.

8

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Digital Reality, Grasshopper Manufacture
Format 360
Release Out now



TIME CRIMES
The narrative is a complex and often confusing science-fiction/steampunk mash-up. The interruptions it causes in story mode, via dialogue boxes (which can, thankfully, be fast-forwarded) are a frequent annoyance, detracting from the simple joys of intense action. Fortunately, they're removed from the arcade and score attack modes, which therefore offer the purest hit of *Sine Mora*'s action. Digital Reality has included a small encyclopaedia of the mythology for anyone who immerses themselves in the game's lore, however.

The partnership of Japanese studio Grasshopper Manufacture and Hungary-based Digital Reality has helped to refresh the typical look of the shoot 'em up genre, giving *Sine Mora* an individual and engaging aesthetic



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SCAN ME TO TAKE A LOOK!

Frobisher Says

Publisher SCE
Developer Honeyslug
Format Vita
Release Out now

A collection of quick-fire microgames designed to showcase the expansive feature set of Sony's portable, *Frobisher Says* is a brazen attempt to ape the surreal anarchy of *WarioWare*.

You're forced to cater to the whims of the eponymous host, voiced by Kevin Eldon, whose whining conveys an all-too-effective portrayal of a spoilt brat. He issues a series of bizarre demands covering almost every feature of the hardware. You'll nudge the analogue sticks to play an accordion, or rub the touchscreen and rear panel to dry a dachshund. It pulls names from your friends list and asks you to invite them to a jacuzzi, then uses the camera to track you winking to make a man dance. Only Vita's portability is ignored; quite aside from forcing you to gurn at the screen, AR- and microphone-based tasks mean this is unsuited to the commute.

As with *WarioWare*, the microgames are attractively drawn in a range of styles, and it has an eccentric sense of humour, even if its strangeness can seem too calculated. Yet it ignores the simple design truth that *WarioWare*'s tasks were a means to a satisfyingly compulsive end, not the end in and of themselves. There's none of the accelerative thrill of Nintendo's series, while the erratic difficulty and wildly varying time limits ruin its appeal as a score-attack game. Nor does it offer any surprises on repeat visits, bar the occasional new game at certain milestones; one's unlocked at the 1,000th completed game, which overestimates the longevity here. **5**



Incoboto

Publisher Fluttermind
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

The setting of *Incoboto* is a galaxy that's used up and burnt out, so it's the task of your tiny explorer to travel about, restoring light to the darkness. In other words, it's a game about universal heat death, but surprisingly sweet with it.

As you rekindle ancient fires, you'll also bring motion back to this dormant landscape, since most of the star pieces you're hunting for, as you leap from one 2D planetoid to the next, require you to muddle through increasingly complex physics puzzles in order to snare them. There are electrical nodes to send seesawing between buzzing connection points, there are explosive fuses to lob, and there are all manner of portals, grapples, jump pads, and tractor beams to use in concert. In truth, *Incoboto*'s fiddlier challenges often grind against the understated loveliness of the art, with its grinning suns and silhouetted machinery, but its fragile prettiness provides just enough forward momentum to keep you going whenever a level tangles itself up in drawn-out set-pieces.

With incessant dialogue boxes and the option to tweet every other scrap of text you come across, this second iOS outing from *Fable* designer Dene Carter has picked up some of the worst habits of smartphone gaming. Its controls suggest it's also learned from the best, though, with much of the fun managed via a single finger. *Incoboto*'s puzzles dip into busywork a little too often for it to be the classic you'll wish it was, but it's still atmospheric, economical and brimming with self-assurance. **7**



Angry Birds Space

Publisher Rovio
Developer In-house
Format Android, iOS
Release Out now

Angry Birds Space initially sounds like an irritating prospect. That's just standard *Angry Birds* with the gravity slider moved around a bit, right? In reality, however, Rovio's latest is an evolution that feels considerably more ambitious than previous updates. The cast of characters has been redesigned in fine Duck Dodgers style, a handful of new bird tricks exist, and the game's explosive playgrounds have been extensively riddled with all manner of parabola-warping gimmickry.

Many of the new levels take place over a series of planetoids, for example, meaning that much of the fun now comes from arcing shots around spheres and watching them enter unpredictable orbits. Rovio's dreamy physics are perfect for this, and they're not bad at recasting asteroids as bowling pins, or encouraging you to send pigs bouncing out of a planet's atmosphere, too.

A frosty new bird, meanwhile, allows you to turn chunks of the environment to ice, while a reworked favourite now acts as a homing missile. If it all seems a little disorienting, however, Rovio's thrown in the comforting familiarity of microtransactions in the form of a suite of extra-hard challenges you'll have to pay to unlock, while the Android version is subsidised by intrusive ads.

Rovio's money-making abilities remain undiminished, in other words, but *Angry Birds Space* contains so many entertaining ideas that it's increasingly hard to write off as a *Crush The Castle* derivative that got lucky. **8**



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science, and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things begins on p134, where Ubisoft's Jade Raymond, the head of its Montreal Studio, explains how she balances parenting with building the ultimate work environment. The family vibe continues when we head to Nintendo's latest virtual playground, Wuhu Island, on p136, but we find ourselves questioning why it lacks the resonance of Hyrule or the Mushroom Kingdom. A retro success is the entire focus of p138, as we slot *Tetris*'s long block into its place as not only the most powerful piece in the game, but a potent metaphor for life. For Studio Profile on p140, we enjoy the large appetite for life of Supergiant Games, which brought us the critically acclaimed *Bastion*. And another indie success is the subject of this issue's The Making Of... on p144, where we find out what went into RedLynx's *Trials HD*, a harsh task master that has dominated XBLA sales charts since its release. Concluding this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p148) putting the scale of the gaming universe under a microscope and Clint Hocking (p150) penning a warning on the phrase that can sabotage development. Then we take a short elevator ride with Tiger Style's Randy Smith (p152) as he delivers his pitch on the importance of packaging, while James Leach (p154) sets a course into pirate-infested waters and lets loose a broadside of questions to determine whether repetition can ever add value to a gaming experience, even if it detracts from the story.



www.bit.ly/jT6wkn
The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



On p140, we visit Supergiant Games, the studio behind *Bastion*, and discover how a closet sound room, a lack of design documents and a tiny team fortified this indie smash

People

JADE RAYMOND

On balancing family life, Splinter Cell and building the ultimate studio



Raymond received a lot of flack for her role on *Assassin's Creed* because of her gender, but regrets shying away from the limelight for the sequel as a consequence

What's **Jade Raymond** best known for? Probably not her greatest, if still unproven, achievement, which is to establish a major new game development studio for Ubisoft in Toronto. Nor for heading its prized *Splinter Cell* series. No, she's still best known for her role as the executive producer on *Assassin's Creed*, and for being the target of a particularly foul explosion of Internet bile at the idea that a woman could take a leading role on a development team and not simply be some PR stand-in.

"It's funny, my friends were all like, 'Your next game, you can't do any PR. You have to stay quiet for a long time'," she says. That difficult period led her to take a step back from the spotlight for *Assassin's Creed II*, so you'll be forgiven for not knowing she was also the executive producer of the sequel. In other words, for all her ready familiarity and glittering smiles, Raymond has kept a surprisingly low profile.

Now 36, and heavily pregnant with her second child, she's in a different position to the one she faced when launching a major new game series in 2007. But she's been no less active. While working on *Assassin's Creed II*, she was also in charge of Ubisoft Montreal's new IP, overseeing six projects. Then, at eight months pregnant with her first child, Ubisoft Montreal CEO Yannis Mallat called her into his office. "I thought he was just asking me what I was handing over [for maternity leave]; then he asked me to run the Toronto studio!"

Raymond initially said no. The timing was less than convenient, and she'd be giving up working directly on games. "I was having creative input on a bunch of different projects and that was great." After all, Raymond started out as a programmer, initially working on *Jeopardy!* for Sony Online Entertainment. She went on to become a producer on *The Sims Online* for EA, and on virtual world *There*. But at Mallat's insistence that she'd said she wanted to run a studio during her job evaluations, she relented. "I realised it wasn't an opportunity I could turn down, even though it wasn't the timing I would have necessarily picked," she says. Her role, however, was to be dual, also being responsible for the *Splinter Cell* series' five-year plan, which encompasses a new game under development at her studio, as well as "book publishing, motion pictures and so on. So there is still some creative involvement, so the creative team can't tell me to piss off as it's still part of my role."

But as the studio grows – it's now at 200 people, with the aim of reaching 800 – her mix of roles isn't really sustainable. Producer Alex Parizeau will be taking *Splinter Cell* from her once they ship the next game. "I feel as if I'm not doing as much as I'd like to for the studio, or for my daughter, and then, of course, there's being a wife on the side, too! That's something I'm definitely not keeping up with. I have to be ruthless with my time. I don't do a lot of superfluous things, I don't really hang out and chill." Indeed, she leaves the office by 6pm so she can spend at least two hours with her daughter, puts her to bed and then works again until 11 or midnight. "It's a startup, so there aren't so many support staff here."

Not only Raymond faces the pressures of balancing work and family life in the studio, of course. "People in the industry are older, they're growing up and having kids now," she says, explaining that this maturing generation expects professionalism in the form of proper scheduling and processes so their that time is respected. Her answer to that is transparency in communication at all levels: "Transparency and professionalism go hand in hand. I don't take the time to sugarcoat or tell people something other than what I'm really thinking. Ultimately, I don't like to underestimate people's intelligence; people always really know what you're really thinking.

"We have a lot of growing up in our industry to do. We became a big business very quickly. I don't think we've had a lot of people traditionally with much management training or understanding of how to run large teams, and throughout the years I've heard some strange philosophies within the game industry about how to run things. So we are trying to do things differently."

"I do wonder, if you have a homogenous team, how are you going to come up with new ideas? "

Part of this extends to staff diversity. Raymond seems to regret, in a sense, that she withdrew from the public eye following the fallout over *Assassin's Creed*: "I think it's important to continue to be out there, because I have had a lot of young women reach out to me and say it's important to them in terms of them feeling comfortable getting a position in the industry. I'm also the older sister of three girls, so I've always had that role of being big sister, helping them with financial advice and getting their careers on track and kind of encouraging them to do that stuff. I like having that mentor role with other women."

Not that diversity only extends to gender, although she characterises the bad old days of staffing as, "all guys wearing the same outfits, sitting on the floor". Stereotypes aside, though, she has a keen point to make. "I do wonder, if you have a completely homogenous team, how are you going to come up with new ideas? How are you going to come up with entertainment that appeals to different types of people?"

It helps that Toronto is one of North America's most cosmopolitan cities, but she's also attempting to make the studio itself attract people from outside the normal videogame professional spheres. It features a cafeteria that doubles as a gallery and is located in its entrance area, allowing casual visitors to have lunch there without needing to be signed in with nondisclosure agreements. Shows by both studio and local artists are held there, too, as well as presentations by professionals in other industries, such as film. And not content with plugging the studio into the Toronto creative scene in this way, Raymond is also engineering a closeness between her ever-growing mainstream games-making behemoth and Toronto's existing and vibrant indie development scene.

It takes someone with drive like Raymond's to build an 800-strong studio from scratch. And maybe some of her competitiveness, too: she wants Toronto to be Ubisoft's finest studio. "The best opportunity I got was starting the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. With a blank slate, we could create anything out of this character, and now I have it on a different scale. But I want it to include everyone's vision, I want everyone to have a say in how we do things here, what the ultimate studio should be like." ■

CV

URL www.toronto.ubisoft.com
Selected softography *Jeopardy!, The Sims Online, There, Assassins Creed, Assassin's Creed II*
Current project *Splinter Cell 6*



Places

WUHU ISLAND

Nintendo's getaway reveals more about its creators than you might expect



Wuhu's architecture is mostly devoid of obvious cultural references. But it's hardly surprising that 'Resort' features in the titles of some of the games it graces, given its bright, idyllic vibe

From *Wii Fit, Wii Sports Resort, Wii Fit Plus, Mario Kart 7, Face Pilot, Pilotwings Resort*
Developer Nintendo
Origin Japan
Debut 2007

What has Nintendo given videogames? Well, it's created mascots and traditions, and even come up with a handful of genres. It's pushed physics and character, too, along with analogue controls and rotating sprites. Yet a big part of what Nintendo always brings with it is an understanding that videogames shouldn't just build environments. To be great, they need to create actual places.

Let other teams play designer – Nintendo's often more interested in behaving like a property developer. So while 8bit competitors were turning out lava and snow levels, Shigeru Miyamoto and company were crafting Hyrule and the Mushroom Kingdom. Both can encompass fire and ice, of course, but do so with coherency, and work on a large scale. Densely playful, bright, fully imagined worlds like this have always told you a little about the mysterious company that made them – and perhaps they still do. Take Wuhu Island, Nintendo's most significant new landscape of the past five years. It's built with the same clear colours and aesthetic values as the company's other worlds, but it carries hints that something's changed. Why don't we love it the way we love Hyrule? Is it us, or is it Wuhu's architects?

Wuhu Island has always stood out from the rest of Nintendo's work, and perhaps it should. For one thing, it's a bit of an experiment. It's not a single space in its own right, but a playground shared across a handful of different games. Wuhu has been fairly busy, in fact. Since its debut in *Wii Fit* – where it was initially named Wiifity Island – it's lent its beaches and pathways to *Wii Sports Resort*, offered up its paved roads and hairpin bends to *Mario Kart 7*, and let *Pilotwings* players buzz over its mountains and waterfalls in a selection of dinky planes and jetpacks. It's been a racetrack, a landing strip, and the backdrop for a virtual treadmill. It's the closest thing Nintendo has to a corporate getaway.

When it comes to variety, at least, Wuhu's every bit the rival of the kind of worlds that Mario, Link, and Samus explore. It has hidden caverns, ancient ruins, and a volcano filled with bubbling magma. It's got mown lawns, a tidy little town and the whole thing appears to be powered by a gleaming wind farm. But while it's rich in features, it's lacking in specifics: the vistas it offers are those of bland, Caribbean prettiness, and its empty streets have the feel of a ghost town to them. Nintendo's almost always a master of scale, and yet here it's hard to judge how well-proportioned the architecture is. And if you move in close on a flyby expecting facades to update or crags to emerge in its cliffs, you'll be disappointed. On Wuhu, the detailing simply isn't there.



Wuhu Island doesn't need saving from a horrible fate. It exists for you to enjoy its facilities whenever the neighbours come over

Wuhu's defined by the bowling alley and the jousting baton, rather than the sword or the treasure map

The island keeps you at arm's length in other ways, too. *Wii Sports Resort* tends to cordon players off in specific areas, while *Wii Fit* places you, for the most part, on rails as you jog around, maintaining a gentle pace. *Pilotwings* and *Mario Kart* both have to keep their audiences moving by design, and both discourage visitors from poking around in things they aren't meant to see. On top of all that, Wuhu's custodians like to quietly shift bits of the landscape about when you're not looking, dropping features and adding new ones with little warning.

Sure, the playgrounds of most Nintendo games are fairly flexible – Hyrule, after all, has been flooded, frozen and splintered into various kinds of dystopias. These changes almost always involve the passage of time, though, and they generally hinge on the protean nature of myths and magic. There's something more disconcerting about the modular approach taken with Wuhu. This is landscape shaped by dull utility – and that probably explains why it seems like placeholder content. Most of its monuments have been named, for example, but the names don't stick in the mind.

Perhaps that's also the key to Wuhu's popularity over the last few years, however: it's defined by the bowling alley and the jousting baton, rather than the sword or the treasure map or the grappling hook. And why not? It's built, after all, for the patronage of Nintendo's celebrated expanded audience – for a crowd drawn in by the company's canny promise of brain teasers, ping pong and healthy exercise.

This audience doesn't want an adventure as such, but rather a day at the virtual spa. It doesn't want to explore, it wants to cycle around, indulge in a little wakeboarding, and maybe chuck a frisbee about on the beach afterwards. Wuhu Island is a getaway for people who have come to compartmentalise fun. It's a place for busy adults whose imaginations have withered, as imaginations often do, with all that fretting over mortgages, telescoping working hours, and cumulative easing.

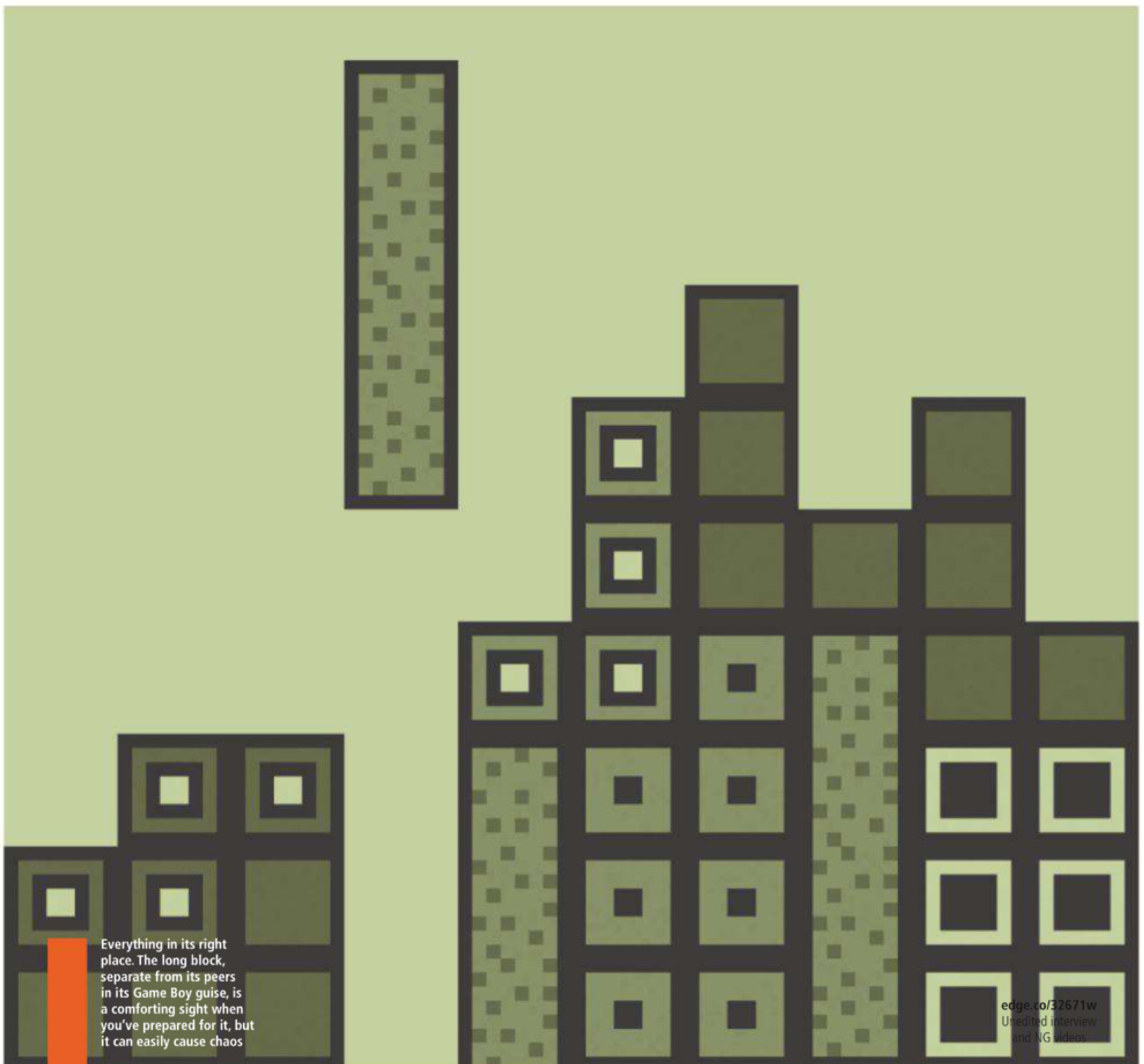
What comes next? It's hard to tell, since the expanded audience the place was designed around has proven as fickle and problematic as the old one, and may well have migrated to iOS and Facebook for good. Meanwhile, Wuhu's presence in older IP such as *Mario Kart* can feel intrusive, like pages from an Ikea catalogue turning up in your copy of The Lord Of The Rings.

For the moment, the island's fate may be uncertain, then, but it's still a fascinating flashpoint for videogames' current identity crisis. Wuhu is nothing less than the fantasy world grown up. The rugged iconography of adventure remains, but the true exploratory spirit has passed on. ■

Things

THE LONG BLOCK

Simple yet essential: Tetris's most powerful piece



Everything in its right place. The long block, separate from its peers in its Game Boy guise, is a comforting sight when you've prepared for it, but it can easily cause chaos

edge.co/32671w
Unedited interview and NG videos

From *Tetris*
Developers Alexey Pajitnov, Dmitry Pavlovsky and Vadim Gerasimov
Origin Russia
Debut 1984

Tetris imitates life. You build an even, supported structure out of the raw materials of daily existence, and react to the challenges that befall it. You clear away the detritus to begin anew. Nothing in life is certain, but your hope is at some point that missing piece – that lover, that raise, that child, that job – will appear and fall into place. You can do your best to prepare for it by getting a good job or by stacking up those five square blocks in an even column on one side of the screen, but you can't always plan for what life throws at you. The longer you live, the faster things get, with days and blocks falling quicker as you go.

The long block (or 'I' piece) is a windfall. It's the security blanket, the hoped-for stroke of good luck, or the successful first date. But it doesn't mean automatic success. It requires that you've built an even arrangement of blocks ahead of time to maximise its effectiveness, and it must also lower the remaining structure enough to let you prepare for when the next one may come along. The long block is a complication as well, proving you're not always ready when opportunity arises. It can exacerbate a complicated mess, forcing you to place a big obstruction on top of a garble of L- and Z-shaped blocks, pushing new blocks uncomfortably close to the top of the screen.

It is gaming's most perfect and mercurial artefact. It's the bane of your existence when you wait for it, but a saviour at the right moment. It's a curse when positioned poorly, and a revelation when it clears a screen.

Alexey Pajitnov's 28-year-old classic also uses the long block to teach you how to play by way of its comparative simplicity. The other six pieces in *Tetris* all create some type of obstruction. The T-, Z- and L-shaped pieces can be arranged on top of one another, but their right-angled pockets can't accommodate the beefier square pieces comfortably. If a clearable line is arranged with those pieces, it can be swept away without the long block, but scraps will remain, and these dangling chunks will make further arrangements problematic at first. And if you do manage to build up an even structure that's capable of earning maximum points, the only piece that can achieve the eponymous 'Tetris' – clearing four rows at once – is the rigid long block itself.

The utility of the long block is matched by an aesthetic pleasure as well. It's nice to look at when compared to the irregular weirdness of the other pieces, especially in *Tetris* for Nintendo's Game Boy, the version that cemented the game's cultural ubiquity. All of the other pieces are segmented into individual patterned blocks. For example, four tiny black squares with white borders make up a single squat square block. One of the duo of L-shaped blocks is solid black, but even it is broken into four segments, the jutting single part at its base taking away the joy of symmetry. The long block, meanwhile, has an even grain for its surface, and its singularity is comforting. There's a Rorschach test quality to it – it looks like sand, like skin, like a stucco wall, or like the finish on an old desk – and that's relieving when compared to the mathematical abstraction of the other tetriminos.

The long block is a windfall. It's the security blanket, hoped-for stroke of good luck, or successful first date



Between releases, homebrews and the like, *Tetris* exists in many forms. Their variation is reflected in the long block's versatility

It's impossible to accurately say how many different versions of *Tetris* have been made over the past 30 years. How many Generation Y kids have made it their final project in computer class? How many high-school students have programmable calculators? How many bootleg iOS versions are there on jailbroken iPods? Yes, the long block's come in many shades and colours over the years, but it's telling that in the widely distributed colour versions its dual nature as both irritant and gift is reflected in the choice of shade. Microsoft's *Tetris*, Vadim Gerasimov's original DOS version, Atari's arcade edition and the infamous Tengen-published *Tetris: The Soviet Mind Game* all portrayed the long block in red, which could be read as angry or passionate, depending on your state of mind when it shows up in a game. Versions of the game distributed by Pajitnov's The Tetris Company use a light-blue long block, which is tranquil and calming.

What's strange about the long block's legacy in puzzle games beyond *Tetris* is that its purity isn't replicated very often. Of the many variations on the basic premise of keeping a screen clear of clutter, most equip the player with a separate piece that acts as a violent solution. *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo*'s big gift is a glowing diamond that will clear away all the blocks of a single colour, *Bejeweled* has its Power Gems and Hypercubes, *Puyo Puyo* gives you Super Attacks, and *Puzzle Bobble Universe* has power-ups that will clear away certain selections of bubbles. In all of these cases, though, that strategic boost is based on something other than the regular tools. The long block stands apart, but it's still just one of the regular pieces in *Tetris*.

Truth is, it's not easy to replicate the kind of simple, direct excellence of *Tetris* or its long block. That's why contenders, or even its own quickly forgotten sequels, have never managed to surpass it. Pajitnov's creation is elegant and singular, lithe and versatile. Speaking with Web site Gamasutra on *Tetris*'s 25th anniversary, he said, "[The game] is very intense, you know? If you play on the high level – and that's where you want to play usually. So, you play on the edge of your abilities, in terms of the speed and reaction, and everything." Just like a life well lived. ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Supergiant Games

How fresh ideas helped the small studio behind Bastion become a massive success story



1 Jen Zee, Supergiant's art director, gives *Bastion* an instantly recognisable style. Here its protagonist, the Kid, stands with a machete and Caelondian Army Carbine.
2 Supergiant doesn't use design documents, throwing everything from music to level design art straight into the game to see what works.
3 A squirt, one of *Bastion*'s many enemies (and allies). Audio director Darren Korb created their distinctive noise from simple mouth sounds.
4 *Bastion*'s main characters are (clockwise from left): the Kid, Zulf, Zia, and the game's infamous narrator, Rucks, voiced by Logan Cunningham

SUPERGIANT GAMES



Founded 2009
Employees 8
Key staff Amir Rao (designer, studio operations, co-founder), Gavin Simon (designer, engineer, co-founder), Darren Korb (audio director), Jen Zee (art director), Greg Kasavin (creative director, writer), Andrew Wang (systems engineer), Logan Cunningham (voiceover), Michael Ailshie (office manager)
URL www.supergiantgames.com
Selected softography *Bastion*
Current projects TBC

There's a hidden flip side to Supergiant Games' name: the independent studio is staffed by a super-tiny team. "In total, there are eight of us," says **Greg Kasavin**, the studio's creative director and the writer behind its 2011 hit debut, *Bastion*. "But Darren [Korb, audio director] and Logan [Cunningham, voice artist] are based in New York, and then Andrew [Wang, systems engineer] spends part of his time in LA. So here at the studio there are only five of us, technically."

Still, the studio's name is anything but an ironic choice, and its approach to development is ambitious, aiming to create polished games that can hold their ground against the industry's big-budget titles. While it may have only released one to date, *Bastion* has been a massive success.

The story behind the game's creation bears some of the hallmarks of an indie darling. For instance, designers and Supergiant co-founders Gavin Simon and Amir Rao were residing in Rao's father's house in San Jose throughout its production process. Meanwhile, Cunningham delivered his 3,000-plus lines of dialogue in Korb's Brooklyn closet-cum-sound room.

Ragtag beginnings, perhaps, but you'd never know it from looking at *Bastion*. This tiny group of people made a huge game that has now sold in excess of 500,000 copies and won more than 100 awards, most recently garnering Best Debut and Best Downloadable Game at the 2012 Game Developers Choice Awards.

The ability to create such a confident game in these quintessentially indie circumstances is almost certainly down to many of the team's roots in high-profile game development. Kasavin met Rao and Simon while they all worked together at EA on the *Command & Conquer* titles; art director Jen Zee (responsible for *Bastion*'s distinguished painterly direction) originally hails from Gaia Online, which developed a free-to-play MMOG; and Wang worked on both *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *MW2* before joining the Supergiant team. "Andrew in particular has been to the top of Mount Everest and back as far as triple-A game development goes," Kasavin jokes. But, on the other hand, neither Korb nor Cunningham had undertaken any game development before *Bastion*. "It's a really interesting mix of people, with a [fair amount having] zero experience."

The one thing the team members all have in common is Amir Rao. He, Korb and Cunningham



Supergiant Games is (from left): Greg Kasavin, Logan Cunningham, Jen Zee, Gavin Simon and Darren Korb (absent: Amir Rao, Andrew Wang, Michael Ailshie)

have all known each other since childhood, while Wang and Rao worked together at EA Redwood Shores years ago. Kasavin and Rao were roommates in LA, and Rao was introduced to Zee through a mutual friend. "Amir is our Commander Shepard, I would say," Kasavin laughs. "He goes around and picks people up, and brings them together. Coming in with that built-in, interpersonal experience and trust really allowed us to accomplish a lot with a relatively small number of people."

> "Our mindset [was], 'OK, what advantages do we have? Let's push those things as hard as possible'"

A balance of independent spirit and professional experience lies at the heart of Supergiant Games, and as such the studio manages to sidestep easy pigeonholing. "That's the hybrid, right?" Kasavin observes. "We're 'independent' kind of as a fact. We're not owned by anyone, and we're self-funded, but other than that people can call us whatever they want. We are a small, independent games studio."

But an independent studio anchored to practical, professional experience. "From EA, not only did a lot of us meet, we gained a lot of good production discipline. I think a lot of independent developers have trouble finishing their games, right? But we'd gone through the process several times, knowing what it takes to complete something and to go through certification and all the ugly stuff that comes up at the end, which is kind of unintuitive. So those are some of our advantages."

'Advantages' is a recurring theme of our discussion with Kasavin. When starting out, Supergiant's members focused less on what they would not be able to do as a small team, instead working towards designing a game that would play directly to the group's strengths.

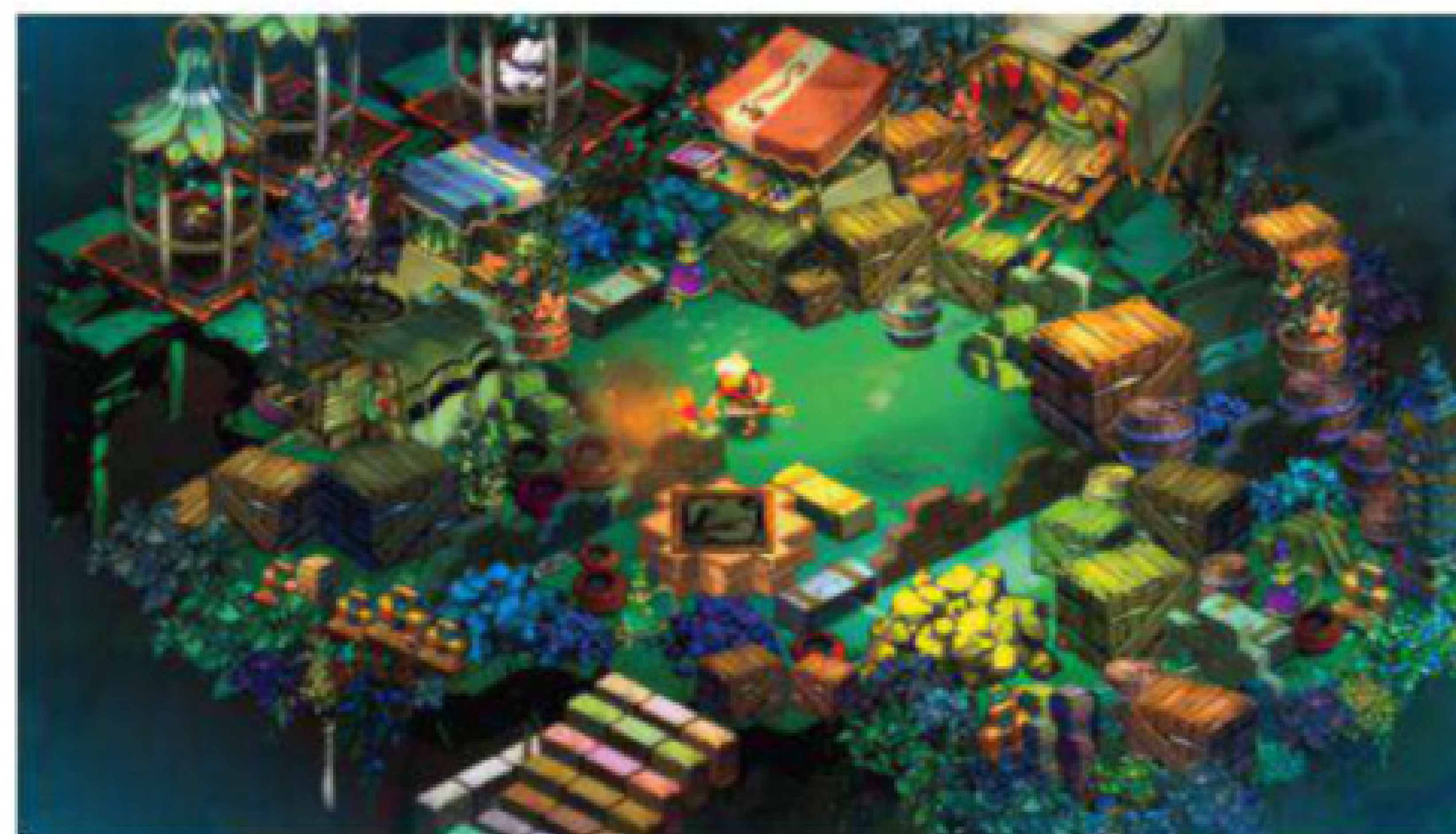
"For us, it was a bit like, 'Small new studio, two people based out of a house, unheard of IP, blah blah blah' – you could fill a whiteboard with the many reasons we would certainly fail because of all the disadvantages we had. So our mindset [was], 'OK, what advantages do we have? Let's push on those things as hard as possible.'"

"One of those advantages was, 'Hey, our audio director, who is a very talented musician, is roommates with a guy who has an amazing voice and is an amazing actor. So, first of all, why don't we do something with voice, and why don't we push on that as hard as possible, because they can record whenever? It's just Logan going into Darren's closet and recording stuff.' Whereas even for a triple-A studio, the logistics of setting up a recording session are incredibly difficult. So we realised it was an area in which we could compete against the big studios head-on."

Starting development on *Bastion* with a pragmatic acceptance of what the team was and wasn't capable of enabled Supergiant to produce a rich, cohesive experience. Art, music, voice acting, writing and design were all completed in tandem so that the entire game could be tailored around a consistent thematic tone. "We would iterate fairly heavily. I would write the content to fit the level, not like there was a script, and then we would work on the level more to fit the content. It's very line by line. So that was a ton of fun, and a lot of work. It was really rewarding when we'd build a level, do the narration immediately and plug it in right away, and it would just come to life. It just added so much to the feel of it."

The goal was to make *Bastion* a complete experience thematically and narratively, so that no loose ends would be left dangling. As





Greg Kasavin says that Supergiant Games' open, collaborative approach to development was crucial to *Bastion* (above) achieving the critical success that it has. It's an approach that Supergiant's new San Francisco studio (left) encourages with its open, naturally lit layout

Kasavin explains: "We knew that the fate of our studio ultimately hinged on *Bastion*, so we wanted it to be a standalone thing where if we went out of business [then] at least this thing would persist and not leave people with the feeling of, 'Why didn't they finish the story?' We just wanted to make one thing that was whole."

Despite the freedom to create something really different to mainstream games, the team's members never lost sight of their determination to craft a game that consumers would want to buy. "When we announced *Bastion*, it was never from a place like, 'Well, what are the feature sets of *Bastion*?' or whatever. But when it [came] time to announce it, we [did] have to figure out a way to describe it for people." Knowing that it's difficult enough to even get an original IP noticed, the team deliberately settled on a game style that resonated with old action-RPGs, such as *Diablo*. "You can't convince someone your game is special, right? You can't just talk about it; they need to try it and feel that. So we wanted *Bastion* to resemble action-RPGs, but then add something more to it and take it in a different direction from what we'd seen previously in the genre. Thankfully, people came along for the ride."

"We knew that the fate of our studio ultimately hinged on Bastion, so we wanted it to be a standalone thing"

It may sound like a safe, level-headed approach when Kasavin explains it, but *Bastion* still took a risk with its consistent narration. Cunningham's character, Rucks, talks over the top of events throughout the entire game, weaving the player's actions and the world around them into a single narrative. It was a bold move, and something the Supergiant team was concerned would not sit well with all players.

"I thought the narration would be more polarising than it turned out to be," Kasavin admits. But after *Bastion*'s success, he has now found himself asked several times whether he thinks other games will follow suit and narrate the player's actions. It's a question that he ultimately finds uninteresting. "Well, they can if they want. For us, it was such a specific solution based on what we wanted to do with the game, and made possible by our specific circumstances of Logan and Darren."

The mix of professional foresight with Supergiant's indie enthusiasm perhaps makes it less than surprising that the team has decided to invest in a centralised studio after only a single game together, when other indies might just have kept working from home. Having moved in only six months ago, Kasavin explains this was more a pragmatic decision than anything else. "Gavin and Amir really didn't want to work where they lived indefinitely. And for me as well, I worked from home for much of *Bastion*. And although we handed the telecommuting very well, and our audio guys continue to be very successful in New York, we know that it's always preferable to be colocated, because it is just easier to collaborate this way."

Collaborative certainly describes the feel of the open-plan workspace that Supergiant now calls home. Hidden down a small alleyway in San Francisco's SoMa district, from the outside the studio is a nondescript building that blends into the street. There's not even a sign to flag up the developer's presence. But inside, it's an open, light and sunny space. A broad hallway leads down past a kitchen and a lounge area (complete with giant TV and Korb's antique videogame consoles lined up like exhibits), opening out into a brightly lit office area. Each local member of the team has their own desk and workspace that slightly faces towards the others, with not a single dividing wall in sight.

Meanwhile, a small staircase – which conceals a modest shelf where Supergiant's and *Bastion*'s many awards and trophies sit – leads from the studio entrance to a small mezzanine level and two glass meeting rooms that overlook the downstairs workspace. There's neither a cubicle nor an opaque wall of above waist height to be found anywhere in the studio.

The open, naturally lit design lends the studio a contented and democratic atmosphere. Kasavin explains that the studio is intended to feel less like a workplace where staff come to do a rigid, nine-to-five job, but rather an exclusive place where the team can work and collaborate as needed. "A lot of the stuff we do, we can do on our own, and we still work from home a couple of days a week. So we'll show up, we'll talk about all the stuff we are going to do for the week, and then we'll go off and do it, and collaborate as often as we need to. There are times when we agree that we all want to be here, but it's super-flexible.

"It's really good. My background is in the gaming press; I started writing about games straight out of high school. When I started at Gamespot as an intern, it was also this kind of hole in a wall, too. That was my favourite [time]. It proceeded to get bigger and bigger, and got acquired by different media companies, but I always missed the small, tight-knit group feel, so it feels really good to have that again."

So despite a successful debut and the opening of its physical studio, Supergiant Games has no intention of ever becoming a supergiant team. "We intend to stay small, yeah, which isn't to say we don't intend to grow. We've already brought Michael [Ailshie, office manager] on board. We will grow strategically, as it makes sense but, again, this company was founded on the principle of that small team environment. We have no aspirations to be like, 'Awesome! Now let's grow to 30 or 60 people!', because soon enough we'd find ourselves back where we started before [joining] Supergiant, and we don't want that. We've been there before.

"We like it the way it is right now, and we're happy with the response that this game got, because for us it is a vote of confidence that people like our approach. *Bastion* is an expression of our preoccupations and values, so it just means, good, people want us to keep doing [this] kind of stuff." ■

Q&A



Greg Kasavin
Creative director and writer, Supergiant Games

With success inevitably comes expectation. But, as Greg Kasavin explains, Supergiant intends to allow the inspiration for the studio's next project arrive in its own time, much as it did with *Bastion*.

What does the future have in store for Supergiant Games?
The short answer is that we are sticking together and will keep on going. It's still too early to say what we are going to do next, but I think, you know, *Bastion* is an expression of our values, and one of those values is that we think surprising people is really important. I think that part of the positive response to *Bastion* I couldn't understand was how important the element of surprise is. Like, as an unheard-of studio, we had a lot of disadvantages because no one had any reason to care about anything we're doing. But it [did] have its advantages, which [was that] we can come out swinging with the 'dark horse' advantage of nobody [was] expecting anything from us. So we [could] really surprise people that way.

But now, thanks to *Bastion*'s success, you're no longer an unknown studio. Does that increase the pressure?
The pressure feels similar to what we felt with *Bastion*. It's a very good pressure that we like. We want to do our best work all the time, and we impose pressure on ourselves in that regard. The trap that we don't intend to fall into is this idea of now we have to make something bigger and better than the last thing! Because that ultimately leads to the mindset of, 'Oh, well, we need to hire ten more people and add competitive multiplayer to *Bastion 2*,' or whatever. We want to make things, so if the next thing we make can have a similar impact to *Bastion*, then I'll be very happy with that. But I don't know what that means in terms of scope, or what style of game that is. We don't have a design document or anything like that. It happens in a very iterative, step-by-step way of how the game evolves. Because we want to make things that feel complete, and that takes time of adding bit by bit until we feel the thing is done.

So it's more a case of you starting with a theme rather than a mechanic?
It's a combination of things. It's a process, like the first thing we do is kind of gather what Amir calls everyone's 'preoccupations'. What is everyone interested in? That could be a mechanic, a feeling, whatever. And we try to establish what middle ground there is and start going from there. We are very much a gameplay-driven studio. We make games first and foremost. We don't make a story and then create a game to serve that story. We do start from a gameplay place. Again, no design documents – everything just goes straight into the game and we attempt to make something playable as soon as possible, and start exploring it and experimenting from there until it feels like a thing.





Supergiant's many trophies are modestly hidden behind a staircase. More visible shelves show off an extensive collection of gaming paraphernalia

THE MAKING OF...

Trials HD

How national grit, wrestling with colleagues and crazy-hard levels helped a Finnish indie make a hit biking game



Creative director Antti Ilvessuo refers to *Trials HD*'s cover star as 'The Dude'. The face beneath that helmet is never seen, but he's become an iconic figure for XBLA gamers

Publisher Microsoft
Developer RedLynx
Format 360
Origin Finland
Release 2009

They call it 'sisu' in Finland. It's a small word for a big concept, one large enough to define the national character. In his book From Finland With Love, Roman Schatz describes it as an ability to finish a task in the face of adversity. Nokia chairman Jorma Ollila once translated it as a special kind of guts, a mindset of endurance against all odds that allowed the company to dominate the mobile market. It's a shorthand for Nordic determination, and a belief that giving up isn't an option.

Anyone who's played *Trials*, the motorbike-based franchise kickstarted by Helsinki-based developer RedLynx in 2000, will be familiar with sisu. It's a series that's renowned for being ostensibly simple and yet fiendishly frustrating. You can spend hours trying to complete a single jump, pressing the restart button so often it becomes an obsessive compulsion. These are some of the most punishing and hardcore games ever made.

"Sisu can be translated to perseverance," explains RedLynx co-founder and creative director **Antti Ilvessuo**. "It's something you need when faced with routine sub-zero temperatures, driving winds, and a small population surrounded by large and hungry neighbours! So maybe we approach our games the same way: if life gives you challenges, it's best to tackle them head on and keep trying, whether you succeed or not."

It's a philosophy that also informs RedLynx as a developer. Since it was founded in 2000, the company has tackled everything from *Pathway To Glory* on Nokia's N-Gage to *MotoHeroz* on Wii. In 2008, though, it faced a unique challenge: taking the cult-hit *Trials* franchise from its Flash and PC roots to the more mainstream audience of Xbox Live Arcade.

"If we ever have an argument in the office, we can take it to the wrestling mat and decide who's right"

Somewhat surprisingly, *Trials HD* was the multiplatform studio's first game for 360. And with a 12-month development cycle and a team of around ten, the challenge of developing for a new platform was nothing to be sniffed at. It would require sisu, a yellow wrestling mat and several-dozen crates of energy drinks to survive.

Being a biker isn't just about riding a motorcycle, it's also about being able to keep the machine running through regular maintenance. RedLynx isn't scared of doing its own overhauls either. Every new *Trials* represents an evolution of the franchise that breaks the last iteration down to its component parts, and *HD* was no different.



RedLynx employees generally aren't bikers themselves, but they certainly know how to prepare a testing course for one

"Sometimes we feel that we're taking it apart too much after each game," explains **Sebastian Aaltonen**, the lead programmer on *Trials HD*. "Every *Trials* game has been a total reiteration, where almost everything has to be done again. Even if the basics are about the same, we always try to improve things." And the result of that approach? "It means people have to work really, really long days because of that," reveals graphics designer **Sami Saarinen**.

Moving from the PC focus of *Trials* to XBLA meant porting the team's existing development tools between platforms. It also meant grappling with *Trials 2*'s memory-hungry graphics engine. "Many developers had been developing for about four years for the Xbox platform before we came to it," says technical lead **Jorma Sainio**. "They had second-gen engines and we thought we'd be compared to them, so we had to do a lot of technological refactoring and stuff, making it more consistent, in order to make the Xbox version look better than the old PC version. It was a big change technologically, because we had to rewrite everything."

Among the components that needed to be overhauled was *Trials 2*'s deferred renderer. "We actually had over 20 realtime lights, all dynamic shadows and things like that, in *Trials 2* onscreen at all times," Aaltonen recalls. "Everything was dynamic and really high quality. But the lighting system wasn't designed in a way that was going to run well on Xbox, so we had to try a couple of different techniques." It was eventually replaced by a slim-platform deferred renderer.

A key aim was to keep the framerate high. As Aaltonen explains: "It's such a time-critical game that you need to be able to react to everything that's happening onscreen quickly. It was really important for us to have 60fps rendering. That was the hardest thing for us… So many console games now are 30fps, and we only had half the time to create one frame compared to those games, but we still wanted to have comparable graphics quality. It was a huge step for us."

Locked into an already-tight schedule, the delays all this tweaking caused (plus the tricky menu system) were punishing. "It was a 12-month development and I'm still surprised we actually made it in that time," Sainio admits. "Maybe we were a bit naïve at the start."

In another office, tempers might have frayed and tensions mounted. At RedLynx, the staff tend to take a more playful approach to conflict resolution. So when Ilvessuo challenged one of the graphic artists to a wrestling match, they searched Google for a supplier of specialist mats. The yellow foam mat ended up in the recreation room. "It means that if we ever have an argument in the office, we can take it to the wrestling mat and decide who's right," Aaltonen jokes. Ironically, as the pair of game makers tried to knock each other off balance, the Finns were inadvertently tapping into the core dynamics of *Trials HD*: fight to stay upright, and don't fall over.

To do this, the game provides three controls: accelerator, brake and lean. Using just these, you guide your rider and his bike across a fiendish selection of tracks. Obstacles include planks of wood, exploding barrels, falling girders and, as things get harder, enormous steel balls on which you must balance precariously. Misjudge the rider's weight distribution and the pull of gravity on the bike, and he'll fall off – often spectacularly.

"The core thing about *Trials* is that it's all about your own skill," Ilvessuo explains. "If you play the game for hours and hours, you improve. There are no hidden parameters that make you feel like a better player." That purity, he reckons, is what drives *Trials HD*'s success: "It's a fair way to make games difficult. You may come across obstacles that you can't pass, but if you keep playing you will be able to get better and pass them… It's about the simplicity also: you have lean, gas, brake [and] nothing else. You know, there was once a suggestion that we have a clutch, but we never prototyped it because we didn't think it was the right way to go. When you see someone playing well, you understand that they're a good player. They're not kind of [exploiting] the clutch."

Playing well in *Trials HD* is a Herculean task, although Ilvessuo points out it's a far less punishing game than its predecessors, especially the infamously arduous *Trials 2*. Although earlier

use of leaderboards and Achievements helped to suggest that the franchise would be an obvious fit for XBLA, both RedLynx and Microsoft agreed that the ferocious difficulty curve had to be addressed. After all, an inclusive XBLA game couldn't reduce new players to tears.

"*Trials HD* isn't an easy game, but *Trials 2*... that's a hard game," Ilvessuo says. "A lot of people couldn't pass the medium levels, and some of the harder levels were even harder than the extreme levels on *Trials HD*. It's tough sometimes when you make a game and all the people [around you] are really good at it. Sometimes you become blind to the game's [difficulty level]."

Microsoft proved an active partner in helping RedLynx balance the game for a mass audience, encouraging the team to add in easier bikes for newer players. *HD* also got feedback from a wider circle of playtesters than previous iterations.

With its encouragement, the team developed a series of outrageous skill games (see 'Mad skillz'). Variety helped the casual appeal, and offered a healthy dose of spectacle. Stuck on a difficult track? Then try your hand at Delivery, where your bike pulls a trailer full of bouncing missiles, or Ski Jump, where it's upgraded with a pair of skis and you're challenged to make the biggest jump possible.

For a game about motorbikes, *Trials HD* is improbably funny. The action has a sick slapstick edge to it. If Jigsaw from the Saw movies and the team of Jackass collaborated on videogame levels, they couldn't be any more amusingly punishing than these. Part of the fun is watching the rider – a sophisticated ragdoll – being thrown from his bike into sheets of glass or raging flames. Whenever you fail or bail, you'll inevitably hear the poor guy screaming in agony.

Driving it all is the physics model, which uses bullet physics and treats machine and man like a series of interconnected springs. "The rider and the bike are made of many different parts, and there are some springs and forces between those parts, which glues them together," Aaltonen says. "When we need to turn the rider, we actually pull the handlebar and stretch the forces between the hands of the rider and the bars. The rider pulls himself forwards and everything follows with those connections. We have some little fake forces that help make it feel right. It's basically springs and the bike's suspension."

What gives *Trials HD* its edge is that the rider is more than just a conventional ragdoll. There is no free animation and all the rider's movements are created through the physics engine itself, which gives the impression that he's really riding the bike. "If you think about most games, the ragdoll is not funny, because it's not reacting and he doesn't have the inner forces," Ilvessuo notes. "Our rider is an active ragdoll that reacts to the environment, and you can control it. That creates the feeling that if something is happening, it's really happening. The Dude is more than just a doll. He's an active, semi-interactive ragdoll. He's not a normal ragdoll character."

The model is sophisticated enough that if the rider is knocked unconscious, his limbs will go floppy as he flies through the air. "It's the kind of thing players don't notice right away, but they just feel, 'Hey, it looks real.' They don't think that there are all these systems behind it."

Q&A



Sebastian Aaltonen
Lead programmer for *Trials HD*, Red Lynx

***Trials HD*'s levels are all set indoors. Why is that?**
The warehouse setting was perfect... because our engine wasn't that optimised at that point. A simple indoor scene is much easier to render than big outdoor environments where you can see for kilometres. With the technology we had, we couldn't have done anything else in that timeframe.

The team made the levels using the same editor that shipped with the game, right?
Originally, we tried to make our game engine run with a mouse and keyboard, but we quickly rejected that. Our [in-house] level editors were using the gamepad all the time, and it meant we were constantly testing [the editor], which was good, as it's a very complex part of the game. We were trying to create tools that could be used by our own editors and by the players, so we had a good-quality editor to use.

How did user-generated levels surprise you?
In some cases we've thought: 'How did users actually manage to make this track like this?' The user-generated content has been really nice, and from it we hired a few level editors who are now working for us. One of them [with the Gamertag Pahapertti] was from Finland. He was at the top of the leaderboard. There are also two guys from the UK [KatamariUK and AkatsukiUK], who worked on the DLC tracks.

It wasn't just ragdolls and wrestlers that were being flung around the Helsinki office before *Trials HD* hit XBLA on August 12, 2009. Figures were being tossed around, too. "We were internally guessing how much it would sell," Aaltonen recalls. "Most guesses were 200,000 or 300,000. On the first day, we saw 25,000 people on the leaderboards. We were asking Microsoft: 'Is this normal?'" It wasn't normal at all. But it was only the beginning.

By September 23, *Trials HD* had chalked up over 300,000 sales. In March of the following year, it throttled past the 1 million mark (over 825,000 copies of the game, and 185,000 copies of the Big Pack DLC). By May 2011, sales had surpassed two million with DLC included.

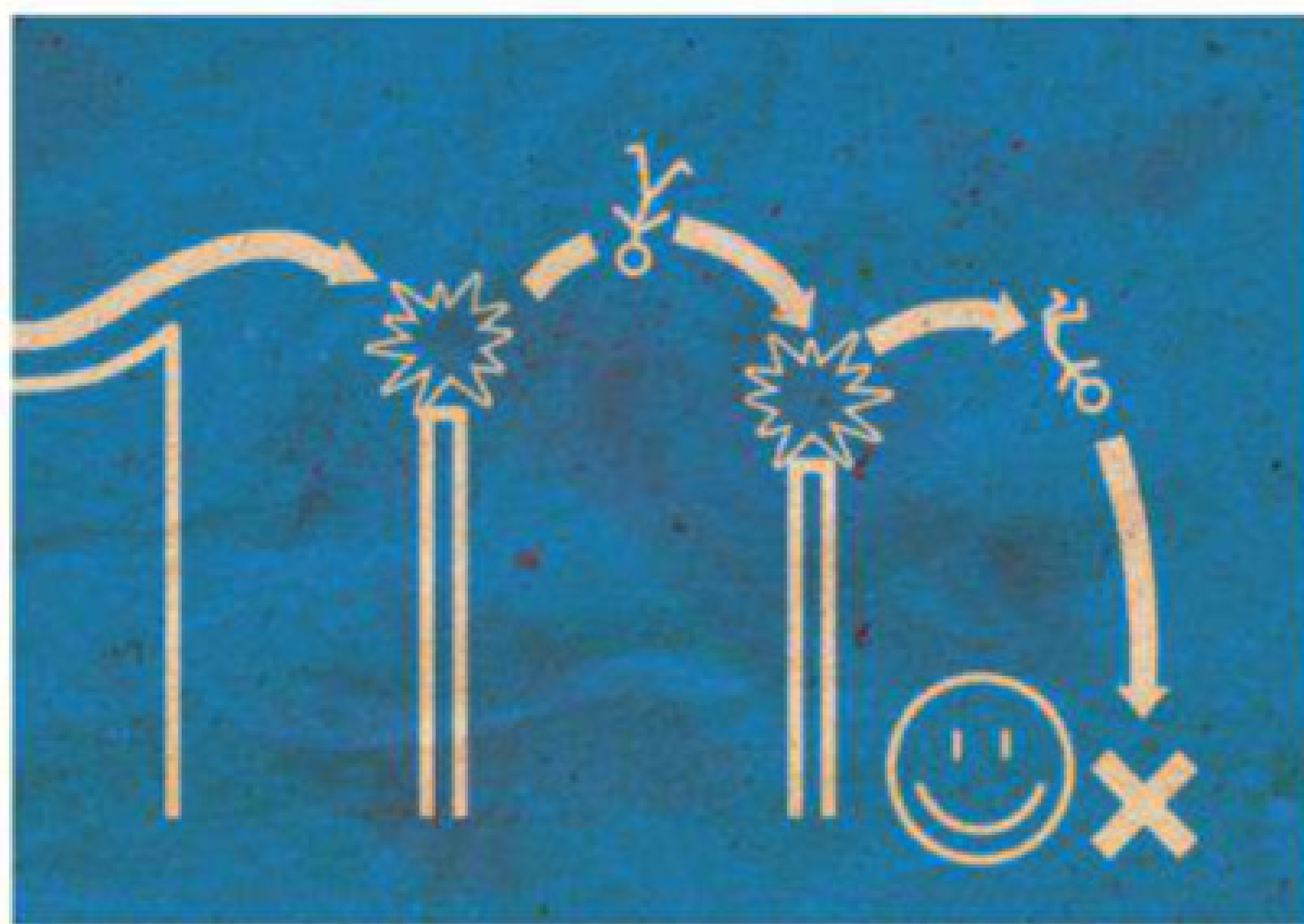
Even factoring in the sales boost that being part of Microsoft's Summer Of Arcade gave the game, its staying power has been impressive. As long tails go, *Trials HD*'s has been of diplodocus proportions. Just to ensure nobody missed out on the moto goodness, Microsoft released a retail version of the game as part of a three pack with Summer of Arcade peers *Limbo* and *'Splosion Man*. XBLA was enjoying rude health as a platform for innovative games.

Such success means RedLynx now has more than sisu in the bank. "When we worked on *Trials HD*, the company was really small, and the resources we had were very limited," Sainio explains. "If we wanted one or two extra guys on the project, we couldn't [have them]. Now that we have much more income," he chuckles, "things are much easier, and we can do things the way we want instead of how we're limited to."

It also opened a new chapter in RedLynx's future. A deal with Ubisoft, announced in November 2011, has made this former indie studio part of the Ubi family. "On the development side, the deal is still young," says Ilvessuo when asked how it will change the way RedLynx approaches its games. "On a core development level, in three months there haven't been many changes yet. Let's see what the future brings."

What exactly did Ubisoft see in RedLynx? In part it was the strength of its brands and its prolific output. But it was also attracted by the studio's expertise in the online and digital download market. Ilvessuo: "In general, I would say in Ubisoft that there is a lot of sharing, where people can talk about what they've done and why."

A sharing of knowledge, then? "I think that's a really big part in Ubisoft: there's a lot of sharing in every way." Who knows, perhaps this Finnish developer will take time out from the moto-based madness long enough to teach the French game industry giant about the benefits of sisu. With *Trials Evolution* (see p106) revving its engine in a brand-new attempt to rebuild the franchise from scratch, it's clear that the team has got more than enough to go around. ■





Trials HD's levels are set in cavernous abandoned warehouses where unseen antagonists have built sadistic courses. Part of the success of *Trials* is to make wiping out amusing, of course, via its ragdoll physics



This early concept art perfectly captures the game's over-the-top ethos and its hardcore aesthetic



Mad skillz

During *Trials HD*'s development, Ilvessuo and the team worked on two minigames: Freestyle, a *Tony Hawks*-style tricks mode, and Crash, a frantic demolition derby that could have taken its cues from *Burnout*. The latter in particular was designed with Microsoft's encouragement to increase *Trials HD*'s casual appeal. So what happened to the two modes? "What happened to them was that they all made the game," says Ilvessuo with a knowing laugh. Although both modes proved design dead ends after several time-consuming iterations, the team didn't give up. Instead it realised that it had elements that were fun enough to make some mini-minigames. "We tested lots of things, and we were aiming for one good solution. We eventually realised we could actually make multiple smaller games [from them]. They evolved into *Trials HD*'s different skill games. It was frustrating at some points, but the end result was really good."







Unlockable bikes and customisable riders are core tenets of *Trials*. The real success story, however, is its level editor, which allows players create their own tracks. It has helped the community to thrive

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

The scale of the gaming universe

Recently, I watched a biography about legendary designers Charles and Ray Eames, who were responsible for many of the iconic designs of the latter 20th century. They and their studio designed everything from innovative chairs to vast exhibits that showed images of the future, technology, Americana and more. They also pioneered the use of film as a tool for visual studies and observations.

Perhaps their most well-known film is a short depicting the scale of the universe. It starts with a scene of a couple in Central Park enjoying a picnic. The scene then expands to ten times the previous scale every second, showing the picnic, then the park, New York, North America, Earth, planets, stars, galaxies and the very edge of what was known about space at the time of its making. After that, it returns back to the couple and starts to zoom in. We see the man's hand, skin, structures, cells, molecules, atoms, and so on.

I think of games in a similar way. It's hard to describe the sum total of a game world by looking at it in a linear fashion. You can zoom in or out and find complexity of structure and lessons at all levels, and perceive how they interrelate with one another. Some designers, such as Raph Koster, use a quasi-scientific lexicon of 'game atoms' and 'molecules' to describe the lower end of the scale, while we often think of games as worlds or universes on the upper end of the scale. It's all about thinking exponentially.

At the smallest level is the 'verb'. A verb is something that you physically do as a part of playing a game. It is pressing X, swiping on a tablet screen, or waving your arm for Kinect. Verbs are fundamental input, the building blocks of play. And like fundamental particles, there aren't that many of them. You only have a few joypad buttons on most controllers, a few commonly used keys on a keyboard, and a few kinds of swipe that a Wii is able to understand.

The trick is in combining verbs to zoom out to the next level: the 'action'. Actions are changes that you make in the game world. You press XXYY as verbs and your onscreen avatar performs a somersault kick. You click to select troops and pick a target (verbs), and your men charge off to attack (action). Actions are usually comprised of one or more verbs, and so while the variety of verbs is low, there are many possible actions.



Whether set by the rules or player goals, tasks drive gameplay. Interaction for its own sake is rarely interesting

The next level is the 'loop'. Scrabble is not just about making cool words. It's about the tactical play of words to block or open out the board. Every time you place a word (action), you initiate a loop of reactions and responses that will come back to you. Loops have several steps, from action through to computation of the result and feedback. They may also involve multiple players. Two tennis players are essentially on opposite ends of the same loop, whereas multiple players running around Blood Gulch and shooting at each other are initiating many interconnected loops.

This takes us to the next level, the 'dynamic', as loops cluster and form into larger movements of play. When you're fighting another player in *Halo*, you'll often trade several volleys of fire, and move around for tactical advantage. In chess, each move is about winning position, but the board becomes complicated over time and pressure develops. Each is an example of a dynamic system, a quasi-pattern that forms from many repeated loops, but is also larger than them. Dynamics are everywhere in games, and a great dynamic is essential for a great game.

Zoom out again and the purpose of a dynamic becomes clear: the 'task'. What is the point of passages of play back and forth across a football pitch? To score a goal. Similarly, what's the point of exploring and combining ingredients in *Minecraft*? To build something. Whether set by the rules of the game or derived from player goals, tasks drive gameplay. Interaction for interaction's sake is rarely interesting.

Tasks then combine to form a 'scenario'. While your task may have been to complete the level, your scenario might be to finish a set of them to gain a gold star. A scenario is like a chapter of a game that takes time to finish. Completing a scenario might well complete the game, or lead to a shift in location or orientation.

Scenarios can also cluster into a 'campaign'. Not all games have a campaign in a meaningful sense. Those that do are the ones with hundreds (or even thousands) of hours of gameplay. Finishing all of the main quests in *Skyrim* is a campaign. So is trying to win the Premiere League by playing many football matches, or competing in a poker tournament. Some campaigns have formal endings and beginnings, whether as stories or longterm objectives. Others are less specific, such as building your character in a MMOG or developing your virtual garden in *FarmVille*.

Finally, there's the 'epic' – the quest to see everything the game has to offer and do all you can. An athlete on a journey to become the best in the world is playing the epic, as is someone aiming to become world champion of *StarCraft II*. Most players never stay with a game long enough to witness the epic stage, but the few who do get to see the limit of the observable gaming universe.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

The five most dangerous words in development

You know that part in level four where you're fighting your way across the ruined bridge, taking cover behind all the abandoned, burnt-out cars until you get to the other side and fight the boss? Wouldn't it be cool if instead of just a ruined bridge, the bridge was actually being destroyed by the boss while you were crossing it and fighting him at the same time? In my opinion, 'Wouldn't it be cool if…' might be the five most costly words in game development. Few phrases have greater capacity to sucker a room full of developers who should know better into grabbing the banana in the monkey trap and refusing to let go, even though it invariably drives up development costs and rarely produces the best parts of a game.

Imagine a cover shooter in which you encounter the banal version of the bridge-crossing sequence described above. You've played this level before – probably a few times in a couple of games. Sometimes it's fun, and sometimes it's not. So it seems almost self-evident that if we ratcheted the whole thing up so that the ruined bridge was being destroyed while you were fighting your way across it, it would be cooler, right?

Unfortunately, and counterintuitively for people who rely on their understanding of filmic structure to comprehend games, the answer is usually no. Adding a bunch of complex, custom sequences to a game that aren't describable under the core mechanics is opening the door to a world of pain. Our cover shooter, for example, used to rely on variations on a theme in weapon loadout, cover placement, and enemy location and behaviour. Now it must suddenly add moving deck plates that drop, tilt, or slide, plus cars and other rubble or debris that also moves. Those things in turn introduce the complexity of a physical simulation that did not exist before, or worse, the need to fake that physical simulation. And large moving objects also mean dynamic cover, which can be created or destroyed by the shifting environment. What's more, dynamic cover requires a complex and robust IK animation system that wasn't required before either.

So would it be cool if the bridge was being destroyed by the boss while you were crossing it and fighting him at the same time? Yes, it would be cool if it worked. But if you're even asking the question, it means the thing you are asking for wasn't part of the decision making that led you to the game you have in the first place. Therefore, almost by definition, the cooler the thing you are asking for, the more likely it will be to not work (and therefore suck) in the end.



Adding complex sequences that aren't describable under the core mechanics is opening the door to a world of pain

The problem with the 'Wouldn't it be cool if…' proposition lies not in the ambition to give players cool experiences, but in the idea-driven, top-down approach to design problem solving that these words represent. Without our bridge-destroying boss battle, our bridge crossing just feels like a toll booth. So if we elect to banish the 'eureka' approach to solving the problem, how do we fix it?

How about by employing the discipline of game design? You start, rather simply, by listing all of the player's tools and abilities. Then you list all the challenges that the game can present. After that, you determine which player skills (an explanation of which you'll find in **E**239) are required to overcome any given challenge with a given player tool. Finally, you describe all of the contexts your game provides, and define the basic aesthetic notes that the game hits when different skills are utilised in different contexts to confront different challenges. I know that sounds as if I'm advocating the creation of a giant, hideous spreadsheet that means nothing, but you don't have to make it, providing that you understand it.

With the aesthetic domain of your game mapped, you now have the tools you need to solve your bridge-crossing problem the right way: by iterating toward a solution using the existing features of your game to target specific aesthetic experiences (one of which might well be 'cool').

Instead of starting from 'Wouldn't it be cool if…', you should start from a phrase like, 'We want the player to feel dread and tension as they approach the boss'. This sort of framing moves you away from a reliance on 'eureka' solutions and towards a bottom-up examination of the tools available. Your mapping of these tools might help you understand that giving the player a chance to bypass a couple of heavily armoured enemy patrols and chalk up a few stealth kills generates tension. Or perhaps a steady, but not really threatening, stream of skittering bug larvae depletes a lot of their ammo without allowing them to replenish it – making them dread the situation they're likely to find themselves in up ahead.

Some will point out that a couple of stealth kills and a stream of larvae sounds boring compared to the collapsing-bridge boss battle solution. But don't forget that the stealth kills and the bug larvae are built from the core mechanics, and can thus be endlessly polished and refined, or changed or reiterated if necessary. And you can do that every day, day after day, for the entire production. You only get one shot at the giant, custom, bridge-destroying boss fight before you ship it.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

Packaging should come first

Ding. The elevator door glides open, and floating above an expensive suit that saunters inside you recognise the expertly groomed, impassive face of the senior vice president of deciding which creative projects get the green light. This is an amazing opportunity, because even now you are holding a sheaf of glossy documents that you'd previously hoped might, at best, get shuffled around the secretary's desk for a few moments before being dispassionately filed in the bin. The elevator begins to move.

His cold eyes take you in within the first mumbles of your appeal for his attention, and it's obvious he's navigated this situation before. "I get off on the third floor, which means you have ten seconds," an utterance that renders your carefully prepared, objectively verifiable proposal useless.

"A couple think they are being haunted, so they set up a camera to record themselves sleeping." Bam! Victory. His eyebrows rise in intrigue. Questions flood his mind, answered by his own vision of an evocative shot or amazing scene. What does this couple see when they review the footage? What made them suspect the haunting? What does the girl wear to bed?

"What's it called?" he asks.

"Paranormal Activity," you reply, anchoring the idea in specific connotations: sciencey in flavour, not magical. A conspiracy theory vibe, not creaky old floorboards. Ding.

"Follow me," he says, and you step out onto the executive floor.

Sometimes you can skip straight to the title for everything you need to know. Snakes On A Plane. Bam! Pizza Vs Skeletons. Bam!

How about the other times, though? "It's the future, you're a famous astronaut, and you've been sent to Mars to follow up on a robotic exploration in which life has been discovered in a cave, but you have a jetpack..." Ding. Fail.

"You're in a Martian cave full of alien creatures, but you don't fight them. Instead you research and create them, like grow plants by throwing seeds, so we call it 'action gardening'. In some ways, it's like sports..." Ding. Fail.

"You must cultivate your own ecosystems of alien creatures to explore an otherworldly cave.



Sometimes you can skip to the title for everything you need to know. Snakes On A Plane. Bam! Pizza Vs Skeletons. Bam!

As you proceed, you bring a planet back to life and discover a mystery that connects to its ancient past. There are different endings depending on what you do, and as you populate ecosystems you're filling the environment with hazards and opportunities, so it's also a game of 'create your own level then survive it'." Ding. Epic fail.

Waking Mars does not lend itself nicely to an elevator pitch. Does it matter? Tiger Style funds itself, and there are no executives we must appeal to. But we do have potential customers, and it'd be nice to explain the game to them in a way that piques their interest quickly. Unlike vice presidents, App Store gamers give us at most two seconds of their attention. We rarely ride elevators with them, so the message must come through in packaging materials instead. What footage do we put in a trailer to show exploration, close encounters, our story premise, and a busy, intriguing ecosystem to interact with? How about on a banner image? Should that depict evocative lifeforms in an alien cave, or our heroic astronaut on a Martian cliff? What can we possibly put in our icon – that 57x57 pixel advertising spot, which will represent us for all time – to capture it all succinctly and powerfully enough to entice a second look?

Create best game possible. Design packaging materials to sell it. But what if you did this in the opposite order? "You are a spider, and you draw webs to capture insects." Good premise! We could communicate that idea! Spiders and webs make for great iconic images: they are distinct, charged, and recognisable. If anything, this concept could use a twist, like maybe you learn the story of an abandoned house as you play. But as you develop this game, you can refer back to the premise to stay on target: draw webs to capture insects. That's why this game exists. Does it need a map? Would an in-game encyclopedia add a desirable extra dimension, or convolute the product's focus? Stay on target!

If you start at the end and stay on target, then when you finish, the game sells itself by readily communicating its intriguing concept. From a marketing perspective, this is preferable to an otherwise approachable, playable game that's so overburdened with intersecting concepts that it's hard to tease one out to present. It's better for gamers, too. No one needs an encyclopedia in *Spider*: it would distract from its satisfying simplicity. We all know the feeling of a game that won't get out of its own way so you can play it.

Really, this is product design, not game design per se, but it's a related family of thought. And similarly to production and art direction, it happens whether anyone is consciously thinking about it, so you might as well. Not all games benefit from the 'elevator pitch first' approach, as behemoths such as *Skyrim* demonstrate, but how about packaging first? Yes, they probably do. I bet Bethesda had a plan for selling *Skyrim* before anyone wrote the first line of code.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, Waking Mars, *is available in the App Store now*

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Is there joy in repetition?

As players advance beyond being mere Homo sapiens into something better (but perhaps less attractive), there are elements that are becoming coded into our minds, in the same way that Labradors are born with the urge to chase sticks.

Take clickable objects. On any screen, we instinctively know what we will be able to interact with and what not to waste our time on. We know, as will every generation born after us, when tiny square objects on distant walls are worth investigating, because they'll turn out to be keypads we can access. The same goes for weapons and vehicles we can commandeer.

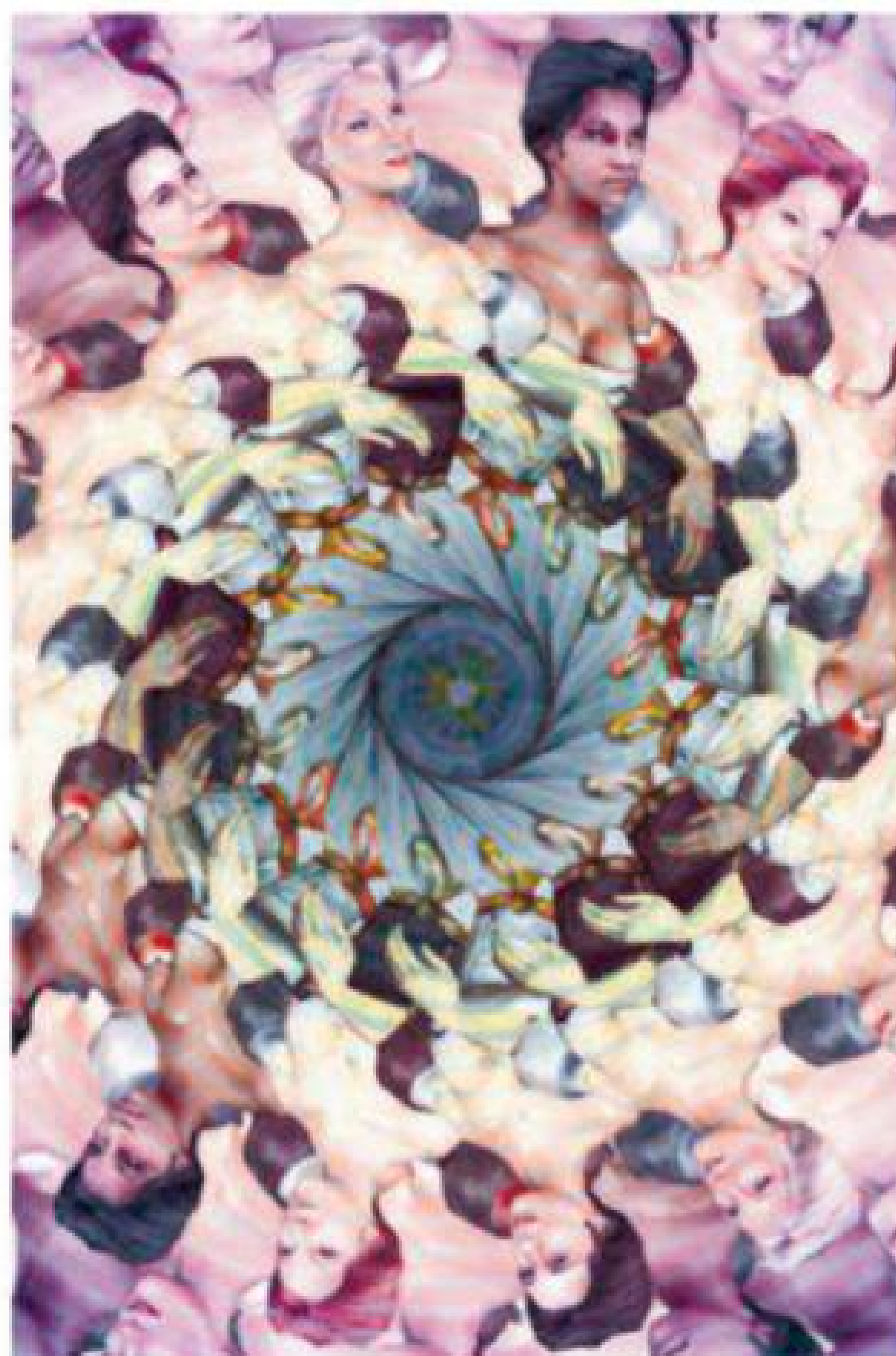
Our children shall walk down the streets of the world, their brains interpreting items, objects and people like the Terminator, filtering out that which will provide them with no useful feedback. Did I say walk down the streets? Perhaps cruising from waypoint to waypoint will be how they'll do it.

Ah, you remain unconvinced. Play *Tetris* for a while and then go outside. You'll be mentally fitting buildings, cars and so on together whether you like it or not. Or go to the Cairngorms and listen to the hikers as they involuntarily blurt out nonsense about *Skyrim*. Or boot up *Grand Theft Auto* and hang out in Sheffield for a bit. QED.

One of the things we're now hypersensitive to is repetition. Most of us can't remember our own names or the last time we were happy, but if we hear one line from a game repeated within the next 50 hours of play, then we're instantly thrown out of the immersive experience and take to the forums full of hate. It's the same with visuals. "That cutscene again!" we howl. "Those cheapskate developers! I paid for this game with different pound coins, so I expect different things in it!"

This desire for everything to be different is much more noticeable if, after console or PC gaming, you pick up an iPad or iPhone to play on. Sure, it's tiny, but why can't it deliver the massive, hugely varied experience I'm used to on Xbox? I demand my £1.49 back, iTunes!

But we new, post-game-world humanoids are not fools. We know we must manage our expectations. For example, I recently found myself once more visiting the world of *Sid Meier's Pirates!* (Yep, it does have the exclamation mark. Sigh.)



"Those cheapskate developers! I paid for this game with different pound coins, so I expect different things in it!"

This incarnation is on iPad, and initially I was heartily pleased with the look of it. The cutscenes especially are a cool mix of neat and retro. I clapped my hands in glee. Then it became apparent that you see the same stuff again and again. Yes, there are a couple of variations, but that just doubles the number of things you're seeing again and again. Don't ask me how this works – it just does, OK?

So when every tavern or governor's residence looks the same, you stop seeing them and a mechanical click-through takes place, mentally as well as physically. Although on tablet it's a tap-through, I suppose. And this is even more pronounced with the text. There's no recorded dialogue, so the amount of space the text takes up is minuscule, especially as a lot of the storytelling is done visually. You stop reading and simply let your eyes pick out the relevant character, item name or piece of information that has been inserted into the string. Funnily enough, you don't even read these. You subconsciously assess the length of the line as it appears onscreen. Longer than normal means there's a thing for you to do.

As I played, I considered how many variations in the lines would be required to keep it all fresh. In the course of the game, you'll attack something like 150 ships, visit 50 taverns, and dance with 20 women. The taverns and women could have a new line for every single visit, with tons left over. The ships could have 50 or more variations without any trouble at all. The *Pirates(!)* world could be enriched beyond measure!

Then something occurred to me. I'm thinking like a writer and a game developer. I'm thinking about enriching a gaming experience, and doing so at very little cost in terms of work, time or money, my daily rate being more than reasonable. But what if the game doesn't need this? What if part of its charm is that you can enjoy the scenes when you see them the first time, or first couple of times, but once they're familiar they work better for not changing? The shortcut method of scanning a line to see whether it's long enough to bother reading might be beneficial if you're going to be repeating the same actions a great deal.

And there's something else. When new things or events do occur, as they do throughout the game, the sheer novelty of them is extremely pleasing. Something different is happening! I'm taking notice! I'm once more clapping with joy! But is this overwhelming joy at seeing the new thing good? Or is it akin to lobbing half a tennis ball to an under-stimulated monkey in a pen?

I'm honestly not sure. Every writerly atom of me wants to put more varied content in. But I played *Pirates(exclam!)* loads and I enjoyed the slickness that came with really knowing every element of it. I happily whizzed past the text to get to the next bit of interaction. I suspect this is also a trait we're passing on to the next generation of gamers. Actually, that's not good, is it?

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online



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